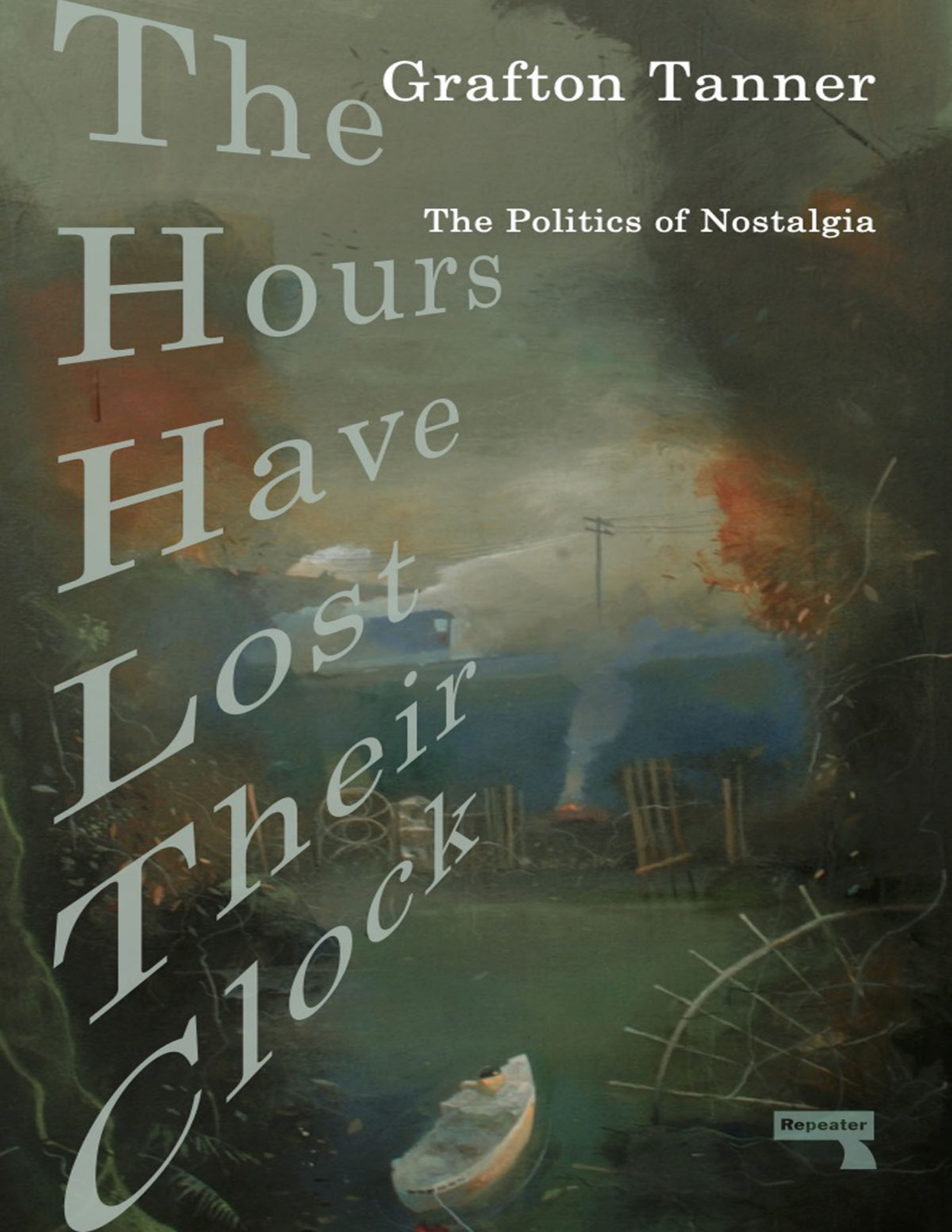
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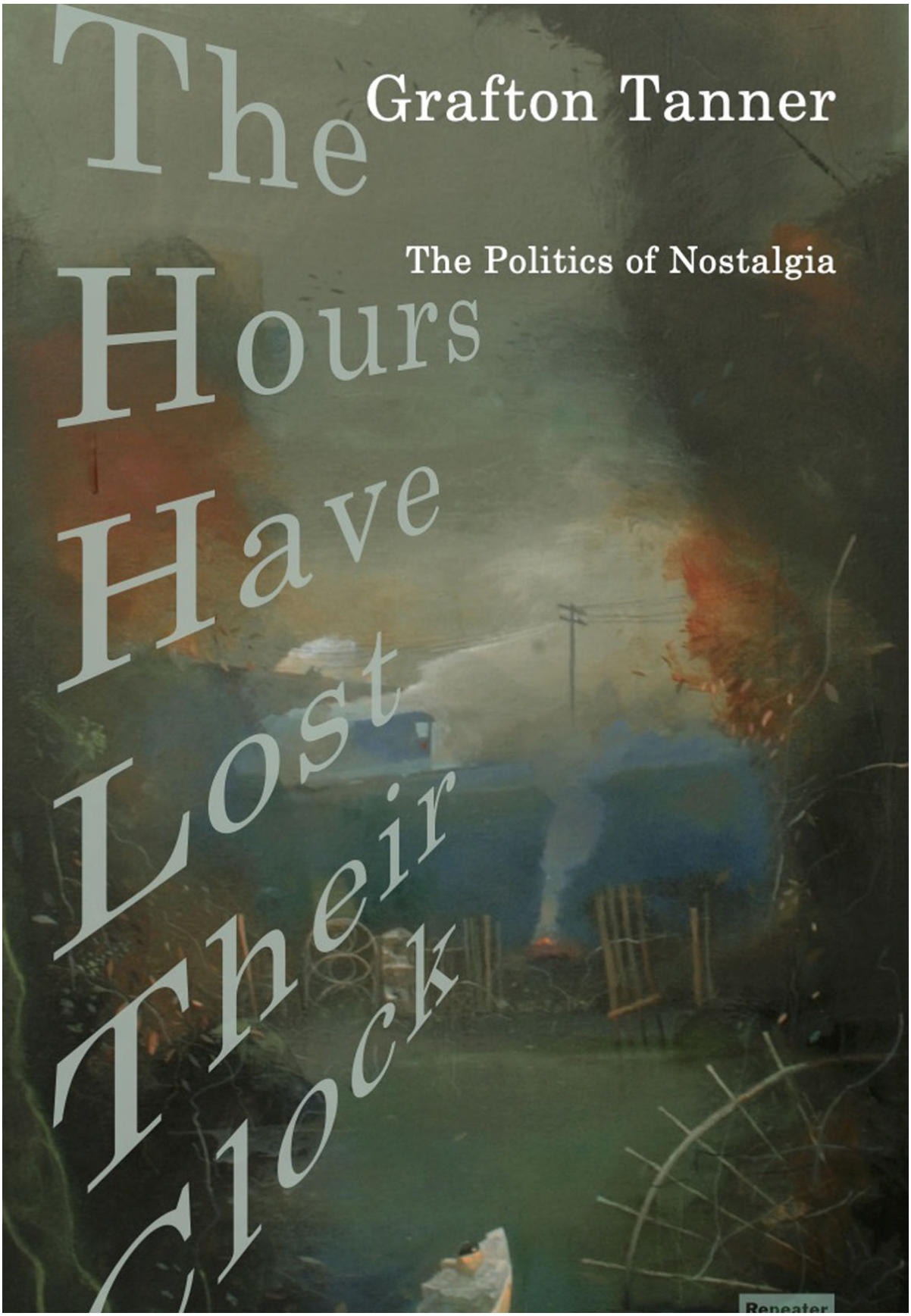
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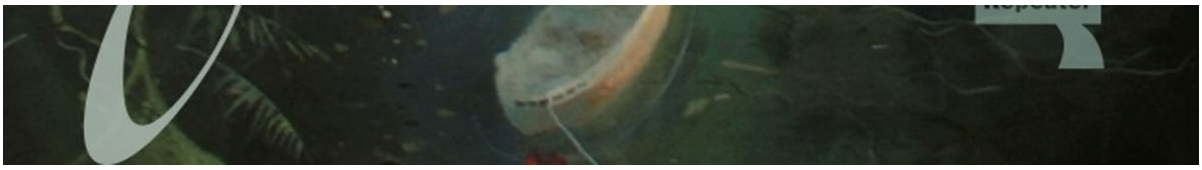

THE HOURS HAVE LOST THEIR CLOCK

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The Politics of Nostalgia

Grafton Tanner

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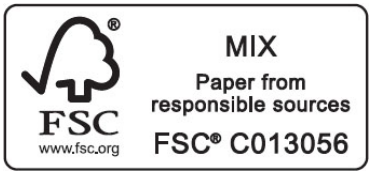

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To Anna and Lily

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One is always at home in one's past.

— Vladimir Nabokov

Introduction

On September 10th, 2011, ABC News ran “The Way We Were,” a special segment looking back at the biggest news stories before “the world changed forever” on September 11th, 2001. Commemorating the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the segment showcased the major headlines of September 10th: Michael Jackson was planning a comeback, Barry Bonds was knocking home runs, and Donald Rumsfeld had declared war on bureaucratic waste. (It wouldn’t be the only time he declared war on a concept.) Social media didn’t exist, and neither did smartphones. “There were no IEDs, no anthrax, no threat levels, no Department of Homeland Security,” ABC’s John Berman reported. “It was the last day of *then*, before the first day of *now*.”[1]

By 2011, many had grown so tired of the twenty-first century that they yearned for a time before 9/11 — sometimes, literally, for the day before. There was a feeling in the air that something had changed that could not change back. Commemorative segments like “The Way We Were” merely gave the public what it wanted: the past embalmed in amber, the days before 9/11 recorded for everyone to replay, and a quick fix of nostalgia for life before the paralyzing trauma of the new century. Unable to reclaim lost time, those who could remember the way we were peered at the past through the prison bars of the present, cursed with a great and terrible truth: to remember 9/11 is to never forget 9/10.

The feeling that we are locked in the present hasn’t gone away. It has merely intensified with each new trauma: the collapse of the climate, the rise of authoritarianism, the financial crashes, the endless wars. We are aware of our place in history, jostled around by world-historical forces like ships in rough seas. Adrift and helpless in the present, many cling tightly to the past and long for its stability.

This aching hunger for the past, nostalgia, is the defining emotion of our time. Although there’s plenty of anger to be found online, despair is everywhere, and fear fuels politics, nostalgia eclipses them all. Political leaders are always promising a return to yesteryear, when things were simpler, less unstable. Media corporations flood streaming platforms with remakes and reboots. Outdated styles are constantly being repackaged, reimagined, and re-tooled to sate present thirsts. It seems the farther we march into the future, the stronger nostalgia grows.

In the late seventeenth century, the Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer coined nostalgia as an intense pathological longing for one’s homeland. While we think of nostalgia as an emotion today, Hofer saw it as a disease. But with no cure in sight, it was gradually mixed into the palette of human emotions, something neither clinical nor fatal, but essentially human. Anyone could feel it, at any time. In the twentieth century, advertisers and corporations took note of its effectiveness at selling products. Citing the latest psychological research on nostalgia, they induced the emotion in marketing campaigns. Politicians also picked up on the power of nostalgia and called on the past to strengthen their platforms, as did the culture industry, which made a fortune off people’s nostalgia for several lost periods: pre-industrialization, the antebellum South, old Hollywood, the 1950s, and eventually the days before 9/11 and the digital age. At every level of Western society, nostalgia could be found working beneath the channels of communication, influencing people’s lives.[2] It

became nearly impossible for the public *not* to yearn for a simpler time in the past.

Today, nostalgia is inescapable. There's a good chance you'll feel it this week, maybe even today, when you go to work or as you read this book. You'll probably hear it in a speech or see it on a screen soon. Wherever you look, you'll find it — and *feel* it.

There are many reasons why we can't just shake off this emotion and embrace a belief in the future, and this book will shed light on some of them. But the overarching reason why nostalgia has broken out across the world is this: many living today are suffering, and the future looks bleaker each year. With little faith in a future of global warming and economic anxiety, many people turn to nostalgia to weather the present, while powerful elites exploit it for their own gain.

(Bitter)Sweet Emotion

Although most people know nostalgia when they feel it, researchers surprisingly cannot agree on what it is. Some say it's a healthy emotion; others disagree. Frustratingly complex to model, it can be induced in a variety of ways to meet different goals. Sometimes it enables prosocial behavior, and sometimes it's used to sell ideas that might not align with democracy. Not all nostalgic sentiments are created equal.

It's often confused with other emotional states, like homesickness and melancholia — but there are some crucial differences between them. Whereas homesickness might be alleviated by returning home, nostalgia has no cure simply because one is typically nostalgic for a time other than the present. Until the invention of time reversal, nostalgic sufferers either remain in their state of yearning or get over it with time. Like melancholia, nostalgia can be induced in various ways: listening to music, watching an old movie, smelling freshly cut grass, or simply reminiscing. But it's the

next step that makes nostalgia distinct. Triggered by something, nostalgic individuals yearn for the place in time associated with the trigger. They start to remember the past and ache for it. Because human memory is tricky, though, what is remembered is often misremembered. Through memory's prism we may see a distorted image of the past, like looking through a kaleidoscope. We might be tempted to believe that things were better back then, especially if life in the present is so chaotic. Without a stable footing, we may be swooned to our demise by nostalgia's siren song.

But nostalgia isn't merely an emotion of remembrance; it's also an emotion of control. We feel nostalgic when we sense a loss of control, when things seem totally *out* of control. Nostalgia can help us regain a sense of control by reminiscing on the things that once kept us grounded — even if those things never really existed in the first place. This is the characteristic of nostalgia that many are suspicious of. Nostalgia can trick you into thinking a particularly tumultuous period was actually quite good, and you might defend it from anyone who says otherwise. This can lead to bitter divisions, as competing nostalgias grapple for control over the memory of the past. Different nostalgias ultimately tell different stories, and some stories cover the atrocities of history in a warm glow, erasing complicity and evidence in order to exonerate the storytellers, who may have had a hand in the crimes. Keeping the public in a cozy nostalgic reverie can generate mass amnesia, especially if powerful interests hide from the people the deliberate barbarities that, if found out, might stoke the flames of revolution.

If nostalgia has the potential to empower bad people to spread historical amnesia, perhaps a cure for it would be a vigilant, thorough documentation of the present, so that no one in the future misremembers the past. But as the present slips into the past, so much happens that we miss. It would be impossible to catalogue every event, no matter how small, as it happens. There will always be things that we don't take away from the present, that

we can only give the past later on once the present is behind us. We can't document everything in each moment, so we have the gift and curse of hindsight to make sense of the present only after it's gone. This act of looking backwards can easily elicit strong feelings of regret or the desire to relive what's now in the past. So instead of curing nostalgia, we have to learn to live with it.

For too long, nostalgia has gotten a bad rap. That's primarily because it's been spread by political leaders to win votes and commodified by corporations to sell products. The attributes we commonly associate with nostalgia — kitsch, backwardness, gross sentimentality — are really just the products of its exploitation. It's often maligned due to its association with conservatism, but nostalgia isn't essentially reactionary or backwards. It's just been weaponized more frequently to carry out questionable, at times undemocratic, missions.

Nostalgia is also sometimes regarded as a kind of failure, a failure to remember the past correctly, a failure to move on. This aspect makes some people skeptical of it; they know that failing to remember the horrors of the past might cause them to be repeated. But what might seem like nostalgic failure could really be a coping strategy. We turn to nostalgia sometimes to heal the pain of grief, loneliness, and old-fashioned homesickness. We might even carry with us certain objects of nostalgia that ease our anxiety in unfamiliar places or times. These kitschy artifacts — strange heirlooms, bad-taste gewgaws, and the like — are themselves often considered failures. Like nostalgia, they too have inspired heated debates. One side believes that kitsch can help people feel more at home in the modern world. Kitschy talismans can comfort us in a world in which we are told to be mobile, to never plant roots, and that refusing to do these things is a sign of backwardness. The other side believes that kitsch conceals discomforting realities. Patriotic kitsch can make you shed two tears for the country, as Milan Kundera wrote, but it'll never force you to confront the horrors

behind the patriotism.[3] Both of these perspectives are true of kitsch, and nostalgia too. Failure can inspire novel approaches and new ways of thinking, opening up possibilities where anything can happen. But it can also unleash widespread destruction.

Arguing that nostalgia is always healthy is as dangerous as claiming that it's always unhealthy. Social psychologists continue to affirm its health benefits, which are important to note. Indulging in a little nostalgia now and then produces good feelings in me, but that doesn't necessarily mean it's good *for* me, at least not all the time. After all, anger feels good too. Haven't you ever felt euphoric after an angry outburst? The person on the receiving end probably didn't feel so good, and the termination of a meaningful relationship might be the result. The same is true for nostalgia.

If the scientific research is correct, and nostalgia does produce positive feelings in us, then why is it often discussed condescendingly? Why are yearnings for the past often dismissed outright as *mere nostalgia* — that is, as backwards, childish fantasies that will prevent people from moving on with their lives? Why are so many suspicious of an emotion that's supposedly a "nourishing and invigorating psychological resource"?[4]

The truth is, nostalgia is paradoxical and always has been. Oftentimes scholars who study it will try to alleviate the paradoxes by claiming that it's *always* good or *always* bad. Or they'll split nostalgia into binaries or types. But really, its paradoxes aren't that different from the paradoxes of other emotions. Anger also seems as paradoxical as nostalgia, but we don't question the validity of our anger nearly as much as we question our nostalgia. We know that anger is an emotion we feel regularly. Sure, there are times we might not like feeling it. We might even try to eliminate anger from our emotional palette. But when celebrity self-help gurus tell us to get rid of anger altogether by thinking happy thoughts all the time, this is impossible. Just as we can't be happy all the time, we also can't live without feeling angry once in a while. That's because emotions are part of

being human. We might like to believe we can think logically without an emotion like anger, or that logic and emotion are mutually exclusive, but our bodies don't work that way. We make decisions with our emotions all the time. Primary emotions like sadness, joy, and anger influence our thoughts and judgments every day, and social emotions like jealousy and empathy teach us how to forge relationships with others. But with nostalgia, it always seems like we're trying to move past it, to get to a point where we don't feel it anymore, or where we're immune to it. Why are we so hung up on it?

The answer could be that we're working with a very narrow definition of nostalgia. Nostalgia isn't merely a retrograde emotion invoked by right-wing populist movements, or felt while listening to a "golden oldies" radio station. It can take numerous shapes. It can aid in the coping process during grief, stir citizens to resist multinational corporations from turning their neighborhoods into strip malls, move people to rethink the public memorialization of certain historical figures, and acclimate societies to the shock of the new during times of great change. "[I]s all valorization of the past necessarily embroiled in… projects of oppression?" Nauman Naqvi asks.[5] At this point the answer seems pretty clear.

Several years ago, I was speaking with two close family friends — sisters a few years apart — about nostalgia. One said she enjoyed watching nostalgic movies and listening to older pop songs. Her sister disagreed. "I don't like it, it makes me feel icky," she told me. When I asked her why, she said she didn't trust the way nostalgia made her feel. This is a common refrain I hear when I casually talk about nostalgia with others. They'll either name nostalgic pop culture they enjoy consuming, or they'll tell me how uncomfortable nostalgia is. We either like the warm and fuzzy feelings, or we're repulsed by them.

There is a lot of nostalgia today, so maybe that's one reason why so many of us have strong opinions of it. And as I explain in this book,

marketers are skilled at evoking nostalgia to sell products, so that icky feeling could come from a general distrust towards the gimmickry of consumerism. Or it could be that, perhaps latently, we still don't consider it an emotion, that somewhere buried deep in the back of our collective mind, we still think of nostalgia as a disease — an unhealthy, even dangerous, disposition that needs to be expunged in order for us to move forward. But we're fooling ourselves if we think this. The ones who shoo away nostalgia, actively denigrate it, or desire to move past it, will find these acts quite difficult. What they see as casting off nostalgic delusions is really just an act of suppressing the emotion. It will always come back.

Experiencing nostalgia can feel like we're being tricked into thinking the past was better than the present, even when we know it wasn't. That's because we tend to be nostalgic for the time period that made us nostalgic in the first place. Deployed soldiers often yearn for civilian life, but upon returning home some of them are nostalgic for combat. Students long for time off from school, but after graduating they can feel nostalgic for school daze: the routine of class schedules, the sports and extracurriculars, the drama that in retrospect isn't *really* that dramatic. Instability produces nostalgia in the body, and from there it can get locked in, making it increasingly difficult to quiet down. Once unleashed, nostalgia grows and grows, like a snowball down a hill. The result of this nostalgia avalanche is that we might misremember the past, leading us to label the emotion as suspect. If you suffered from a particularly strong bout of nostalgia previously, it's hard to cut through the noise of the emotion to remember even a semblance of the past as it was.[6]

Scaled to the social level, this means that *what* we remember is *how* we're remembered. If, at a given time, the public is nostalgic for an older period, then we will likely remember that time for its nostalgia for the older period. That's because nostalgia is a strong emotion that marks the body and the culture, giving our memories something to grasp onto as we

reminisce. The 1980s were nostalgic for the 1950s, and so 1950s cultural artifacts were nostalgically rebooted in the 1980s. The result? We remember the 1980s as a remake of the 1950s.

Individual instability can produce nostalgia, but so can social and political unrest. Nostalgia today circulates as a result of the world disappearing to rising sea levels and falling wages, of the anxiety of economic shocks and ecological shifts. In the wake of these traumatic events, demagogues and corporate interests swoop in and quickly remake the world in their image.[7] Once the shock wears off, people come to and look around only to see that everything has changed. These are the breeding grounds for twenty-first-century nostalgia.

The Decade That Time Stopped

Something happened to time in the 2010s. People started experiencing it differently than they used to, so their relationship to it changed. News stories came and went at breakneck speed, but culture and politics seemed to stop completely. It became increasingly difficult to invent a future when so many were already staring down the twin barrels of climate warming and neoliberal austerity, so the entertainment industries of the 2010s stopped trying and gave consumers nostalgia instead. Some thinkers, like Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds, openly criticized popular culture's appropriation of its own past, seeing it as a general failure of capitalism to imagine anything truly new.[8] And by the dawn of the 2020s, a startling trend had emerged, something far more disturbing: an inability to imagine the present.

Politics and culture today seem static — not merely stuck in the past, but unmoving, frozen, entropic. Nearly every speech or political campaign references a more stable past, and works of popular art sample older styles. Technology, on the other hand, seems to be the only thing moving forward

these days. For so many, digital technology is the very evidence that time is passing at all, that we are indeed still living chronologically. Software updates and smartphone models count upwards, each new iteration marked with a new name and a higher number. Big Tech promises us a future in which digital technology meets our every need. Many wait patiently as the technocrats invest near-endless streams of capital into projects that they believe will change the world, from self-driving cars to neural implants. There appears to be no limit to what Big Tech can do, a feeling that gives people everywhere the rush of futurity.

No one could really organize the events of the 2010s into a narrative, into something that made sense, but during those years many tried. Hanging over the decade was an ambient anxiety to historicize events quickly. The public wanted to know how history would remember this or that event because we yearned for temporality, for a steady order of past, present, and future. But the decade wasn't structured with a beginning, middle, and end. There were instead only punctuated moments, events that rose quickly into the present and fell into the past, repeating against the backdrop of ongoing disasters like global warming and recession.

In the early 1990s, anthropologist Marc Augé identified a trend that was then starting to appear in the West. He called it "the acceleration of history."[9] Augé attributed this acceleration to "the overabundance of events" to which people everywhere tried to give meaning[10]:

> What is new is not that the world lacks meaning, or has little meaning, or less than it used to have; it is that we seem to feel an explicit and intense daily need to give it meaning… This need to give a meaning to the present, if not the past, is the price we pay for the overabundance of events…[11]

The desire to ascribe meaning to every single event only made understanding the world more difficult. The more we hungered for

meaning, the hungrier we got. Ironically, in trying to make perfect sense of the present, we lost the thread of the recent past. A yearning then set in: a yearning for a time outside the "perpetual present," when history wasn't "snapping at our heels," when major events weren't witnessed and recognized by "large numbers of people" who then must quickly give the final word on them.[12] "We barely have time to reach maturity before our past has become history," Augé wrote, "before our individual histories belong to history writ large."[13]

History continued to accelerate into the twenty-first century, and the present came and went with such speed that it became nearly impossible to hold an event long enough to give it meaning before it was flung from our hands and replaced with yet another. One could barely keep up.

By the 2010s, history had reached a volatile speed and was starting to come apart, leading Byung-Chul Han to dismiss the idea of acceleration altogether. "Acceleration in the proper sense of the word presupposes a course which directs the flow," he wrote. But time, he noted, no longer has "anything to *hold on to* within itself." It isn't moving towards anything, isn't accelerating forward at all, but is instead spinning to pieces.[14]

To help orient us, smaller moments, or micro-events, were often made into Events, a mission driven largely by hype. But this mission ended up destabilizing our sense of time even further. Hype told us that *this* album was already a classic, *this* movie was a must-see, *this* was history in the making. These hype trends weren't novel to the 2010s, of course, but they seemed to affect not just the relatively important moments, but every moment, from the most mundane political snafu to the release of a new film. It was a marketing tactic above all, a strategy for major corporations to garner attention or sell products by intensifying moments into hotspots of hype. But it also satiated our appetite for temporality in a post-temporal world. The focus on making micro-events into Events, on immediately weaving them into history, meant that the new was already classic and that

we were always living in history. Sometimes this trend was criticized, like in 2013, when the mainstream press lambasted Penguin Books' decision to release Morrissey's *Autobiography* on its Classics imprint. Or when Barack Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, not even a year into his first term as president.[15] If we couldn't control the present, then the least we could do was control how the present became the past.

But we soon discovered that controlling history — and the past — isn't so easy. Desperate for meaning, some looked to leaders who promised to give it to them. These figures blamed the crisis of meaning on various scapegoats, from immigrants to identity politics. They argued that meaning could only be secured by going backwards to a time before history accelerated into a perpetual present and splintered into pieces. These were blatantly nostalgic appeals. Viktor Orbán, Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, and Jair Bolsonaro all induced nostalgia in the 2010s to scapegoat migrants, leftists, people of color, the poor, LGBTQ+ groups, and the disenfranchised. They knew how firmly the emotion holds attention and how badly their constituents wished to satisfy the hunger for meaning.

Depressed and anxious, the public was also fed a diet of nostalgia through mass media, and the well to tap was the late twentieth century — specifically, the decades before 9/11. This led to the birth of the nostalgia industry, a branch of the culture industry that sells nostalgic hokum as escapism. The nostalgia industry traffics in retro, rebooting old television shows, writing prequels and sequels to bygone films, and turning them into franchises and worlds of their own. And it works in concert with news media conglomerates: the latter stoke anger and hate, and the former provides the nostalgic balm. This emotional feedback loop became a crucial component of the attention economy in the 2010s.

It's important to note that the public is not to blame for its nostalgia today. Many people yearn for stability, and nostalgia is an emotional part of this yearning. It is a human right for people to live without the anxiety of

collapse waving slowly over their heads like an axe. But a society built according to volatile market logic precludes any social stability. And so nostalgia has become a kind of magic. Whenever a corporation or a demagogue or an influencer wants to trigger nostalgia, all they have to do is wave the wand. Hanging by a thread, many will beg for the magic.

So far the future is at risk of being destroyed entirely, thanks to pandemics, economic collapse, global white supremacy, biased algorithms, and ecological devastation, each of which knocks the world further out of time's orbit. Few are able to make sense of the violent hail of information. Everywhere, people caught in the gyre of instability yearn for a simpler time and look to imagined vistas of the past as their cynosure. For some, nostalgia serves as protection from oppressive regimes. For others, it facilitates the oppression. It's natural to feel nostalgic once in a while. But if we keep failing to escape the vortex of reactionary nostalgia, then we are in big trouble.

The Politics of Nostalgia

The title of this book doesn't imply that time has been liberated and that our lives are no longer determined by countdowns and deadlines.[16] On the contrary, we are controlled by the clock now more than ever before. It's just more invisible now, and its invisibility is what gives it power over our lives. In our post-Fordist society, there is little demarcation between life and work. Life *is* work. We're expected to always be on the clock, spending time hustling, branding, promoting, and networking. And the more that our lives are spent on the clock, the less real time feels. It seems like the hours have lost their clock simply because we are always racing against the clock, always working to meet its demands. The hours are plastic, the seconds expand and contract — what day is it? How long has it been?

Nostalgia can provide some comfort when the answers to those questions seem out of reach. But nostalgia can also contribute to the feeling of post-temporality. This is a central problem with nostalgic feedback loops: the more we rely on it to ground us, the more adrift we sometimes feel. Is this a good thing for us as a society, to be trapped in one nostalgic cycle after another? And why does there seem to be so much of the emotion circulating today? It's time to take a closer look at who or what is deliberately spreading nostalgia and why.

When you think of nostalgia, you might not immediately think of politics. To many, nostalgia is that wistful feeling you get while reminiscing about the "good old days." Or it's a cultural style, like a new movie shot in black and white, or a comedy series about teens coming of age in an older decade. But nostalgia has shown up in electoral politics before, most notably in the US with the catchphrase "Make America Great Again," which was sloganeered on the campaign trail by Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and Donald Trump. The problem is that studying nostalgia merely as an embodied emotion or as a cultural style doesn't give us a full picture of it. To understand it, we have to go beyond discussing whether a television series or a pop song evokes nostalgia and start asking *why* something induces nostalgia and *who* may benefit from it. Analyzing nostalgic trends in culture is part of this agenda, and so is understanding how nostalgia manifests in the body. But this book discusses what happens when an emotion like nostalgia is deliberately shared widely among disparate groups of people, across media and through culture, from the mouths of leaders to the hearts of citizens. Whose interests are supported by shaping and sharing this emotion? Do we need to eliminate it, or just cultivate it better? And what is at stake if we make the wrong choice?

Audre Lorde once wrote, "[O]ur personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action."[17] Put another way: the personal is always political. *Everything* is political. Everything exists in power dynamics,

within exploitative thought processes and supply chains, and our goal as living, feeling people is not to depoliticize things but to understand our acts as political — and our emotions as political as well. We feel things and share those feelings with others. We rely on one another to survive, meet goals, and better the lives of our peers. We're stitched within larger networks of people and, therefore, within larger networks of power. So there's no way to extract individuals and pretend they're outside the realm of politics. As public and private realms merge in the digital age, many are realizing this truth.

That being said, the point of this book isn't to unmask every nostalgic façade until we arrive at the ugly origin point, to get back to the "real" by throwing off nostalgia's disguise. It's futile to try to extinguish nostalgia completely, because the problem isn't nostalgia per se, but how it's used. What stories are told with nostalgia, and who tells them? What do they have to gain? And above all, who do these stories erase? In short: who gets left out of the remake?

Powerful people today aren't merely engineering nostalgia out of thin air for us to consume. They're working with the crises of the present moment, many of which they've had a hand in influencing, from climate catastrophes to economic crashes. Nostalgia is both an unavoidable emotional reaction to the reckless missions of capitalism and an emotion often induced to justify them.

This means that nostalgia is serious business. We might not be interested in taking it seriously, but others are. Companies are turning to the marketing literature on nostalgia to figure out how to get us to buy things. They know how effective it is to tell nostalgic customers to purchase this car, this house, this cruise trip, by first convincing them they've lost something. And political leaders are searching the past for the next historical event to appropriate for their campaigns, coercing the public into feeling nostalgic for the "right" histories, and sometimes convincing us that

escaping into an intolerant past is the key to the future. At the same time, we're going to have to get used to feeling nostalgia in a world racked by constant catastrophe. It's up to us to decide how we shape and share nostalgia, and the first step is to move past our condescending suspicion of it.[18] The very future depends on it.

Part I
The Past in the Present

Chapter 1
What Is Nostalgia?

At some point in the 1680s, a young medical student, Johannes Hofer, started hearing stories about a strange disease infecting Swiss mercenaries stationed in the Alps. The illness caused an intense, inconsolable form of homesickness. Sufferers longed for home-cooked meals, their mothers, and their normal lives, and without treatment many of them died. Intrigued by the disease, Hofer decided to write his medical dissertation on it. At the time, the sickness only affected hired guns fighting far from home during an unstable period in history. Hofer was probably aware that the tide of history was turning, and perhaps he believed that social and political unrest could breed new maladies in the body. Or maybe he was just trying to make a name for himself in medicine by coining a new disease. Whatever the reason, Hofer called it *nostalgia* — from the Greek words *nostos* and *algia*, "homecoming" and "ache" — and concluded that, unless the sufferer was sent back home, the condition could be fatal.

Born in Mulhouse, in southern Alsace, Hofer studied medicine in Basel. Maybe Hofer, like so many students before and since, felt a little nostalgic away at school. After writing his dissertation on nostalgia in 1688 and earning his medical degree, he moved back home to Mulhouse, where he practiced medicine and served on the city council. From there, Hofer's mentors helped popularize nostalgia after he graduated, and by the nineteenth century medical students across France were writing

dissertations on this confounding new disease.[1] Little did Hofer know the word he had created would long outlive him.

But did Hofer "discover" nostalgia, as one would discover a new species? Or did he create something new by naming it?

"[W]e can't reasonably say… we have always been nostalgic (or, conversely, that nostalgia is some sort of hardwired 'basic emotion')," writes historian Thomas Dodman.[2] Dodman regards nostalgia as a historical problem — that is, he thinks it doesn't do us any good to speculate if nostalgia existed before 1688 and Hofer just put a name to it. "We might well have never been 'nostalgic' if only [Hofer] had opted for 'philopatridomania' or one of the other unwieldy neologisms he toyed with before choosing the more elegant one," Dodman claims.[3] But is it really the case that before 1688 no one felt nostalgic?

As far as we know, the word nostalgia didn't appear until Hofer's dissertation. But that doesn't mean the emotion wasn't felt before 1688. "The fact that exiles languished and wasted away far from their native land was not an original observation," Jean Starobinski wrote about Hofer.[4] What Hofer did was "convert this emotional phenomenon into a medical phenomenon, exposing it, in so doing, to rational inquiry."[5] A feeling felt for ages was suddenly abnormal in the eyes of medicine. This was Hofer's contribution to medical science: a word that, once coined, would name an incurable disease for over two hundred years, and which eventually drifted into common parlance as an emotional state, all the while stained with the residue of its clinical origins. No longer a disease today, nostalgia is still not the emotion it used to be before its medicalization. Having passed through the hands of clinical science, it bears a nosological trace and must now justify itself as an emotion to a public that continues to question it. This split personality, this "Janus-faced" valence, is what makes nostalgia so confounding, and so fascinating.[6]

What Are Emotions?

To get a grip on nostalgia, we have to get a grip on our emotions: what they are, how they function, and why they can change.

Emotions are intense reactions to certain events. The process of feeling an emotion usually goes something like this. After we perceive an event — like getting honked at in traffic, receiving news of a loved one's death, tripping in front of a group of people — we interpret the meaning of the event as positive, negative, neutral, or somewhere in between. We then become physiologically aroused depending on how we interpret it. Our heart rate increases, we start to sweat, tears fill our eyes. At this point, we become aware that we are experiencing an emotion. If someone in a fit of road rage yells at us in traffic, our heart starts beating quickly, and we feel like taking some kind of action, we will likely label the emotion we're feeling as anger. How we manage this emotional reaction, though, is also part of the process of feeling emotions. Emotional management is constrained by historical, cultural, situational, and relational norms. These norms tell us the appropriate ways to react in the emotional moment, and we try to express our emotions according to those norms. Otherwise we may react inappropriately, like laughing out loud at a funeral, and others may see us as disrespectful.

This is all to say: emotions are felt in the body, but are shaped symbolically. Language is one symbolic element that opens up different emotional possibilities. Words themselves can lead to thoughts that trigger emotional states. We can feel afraid in the presence of physical threat — like an armed assailant or a hungry lion — but we can also feel afraid when we read an article about the perils of global warming. The flames of megafires might not be lapping at everyone's doors right this minute, but we can still fear them, just as we can fear economic collapses and asteroid strikes. This means that symbolic factors play a role in feeling emotions.

All kinds of social discourses, from speeches to songs to advertisements, can influence our emotions. For people who believe that emotions should be left out of decision-making processes, or that emotions are more suspect than logic, this can be a bad thing. But it isn't. We shouldn't ask whether a movie or a meme is arousing our emotions. Rather we should ask which emotions are the most useful for us at a given time. The point isn't to suppress emotions on the individual or social level, but instead to direct the flow of emotions towards positive, prosocial ends. This isn't easy. It requires us to not only take stock of our emotions at the social level, but to also push back when we sense that our emotions are being manipulated to prop up dangerous ideologies. It also requires us to work through which emotions are appropriate for the public at the right time, and which aren't. Anger may not be the best emotion to elicit at a given time, but at other times it might be. And it's unhealthy for a person, and a society, when a single emotion like anger is propagated around the clock by news media, politicians, and bots. Emotion-sharing shouldn't be manipulative but, rather, healthy for both an individual's wellbeing and the larger society in which they participate.

One's culture, time period, relationship with others, and a host of other factors constitute and *re*constitute emotions. Different cultures, at different times, might label emotional reactions differently and direct them in different ways. For example, in the US, love does a lot of heavy emotional lifting. It can mean romantic love, but it can also mean the caring type of love or just a general fondness towards things. I can love my spouse and also love my job, two very different understandings of the emotion. But ancient Greece categorized love differently, slicing it into several different types, from *agape* to *eros* to *philia* and more. Emotions can also change with the times. To Aristotle, anger was a reaction to having one's personal status belittled.[7] By his definition, slaves couldn't be angry because their status was too low to be insulted.[8] Today, we have a different definition of

anger, one not limited to status insults, so we acknowledge that all kinds of people can feel it.

Before 1688, there were no documented accounts of nostalgia, but this doesn't mean people didn't feel it. Just as slaves likely felt anger in Aristotle's day, people probably felt something like nostalgia long before Hofer wrote his dissertation. In fact, we can identify nostalgia in some of the oldest works of antiquity. Written long before Hofer's dissertation, Homer's *Odyssey* is, as Barbara Cassin calls it, "the very poem of nostalgia."[9] The epic poem follows Odysseus as he tries to return home to the island Ithaca after the Trojan War. He encounters all sorts of trials and adversaries, from the shipwrecking Sirens to the monsters Scylla and Charybdis. Curious to hear the Sirens' song, but not too curious as to wreck his ship and drown, Odysseus orders his men to tie him to the mast as they pass by the Sirens. Upon returning home after many years, Odysseus doesn't recognize it — the very mark of nostalgia's tendency to misrecognize one's home.

Nostalgia afflicts many of the characters in the *Odyssey*, yet the word "nostalgia" doesn't appear in the text. But as Norman Austin has pointed out, the emotion is there nonetheless:

> A person could have coined the word [nostalgia] simply by reading the *Odyssey*; if the word itself does not appear there, certainly the poem is the first document in our tradition to articulate the idea. *Nostos* is one of the most frequently used nouns in the poem. It occurs some one hundred times; in addition to the simple noun, the poem has the adjective *nostimon*, as in *nostimon emar*, one's "day of homecoming," and the verb *nosteo*, "to make a homecoming." Grief is almost always the prevailing emotion that accompanies the word. In one instance *nostos* and *algae* (pains) are brought together in the same verse, though not yet joined into a single noun. So often is *nostos* used in a context of sadness, grief, and loss that *nostos* and

> *nostalgia* become almost synonymous. Joy is a rare emotion in the poem; even when Odysseus is loved and promised immortal life by an immortal nymph, his life with her is joyless. Whenever a character in the poem uses the word *nostos*, that person speaks from a core of pain.[10]

By 1688, the pain associated with *nostos* was foregrounded, thanks in part to Hofer's catchy neologism. The spread of the word itself certainly contributed to the spread of the emotional feeling, because our specific understanding of an emotion often comes to us once it's been codified in language.[11] But nostalgia didn't appear simply because it was given a name. As Alastair Bonnett points out, "new words do not necessarily demonstrate new things."[12] Looking at nostalgia etymologically, while ignoring other cultural, historical, and emotional forces, only "offers a slender window onto history."[13] These forces converged at a particular period in history to, at the very least, shape the word and ailment associated with it, such that "yearning for home" and "pain" were finally joined as one noun. Perhaps the rise of the medical sciences in the early modern period foregrounded the "pain" that for so long had been associated with *nostos* but hadn't yet been viewed as a medical problem. Other words describing similar feelings, such as "the German *heimweh*, the English *homesickness* and the French *maladie du pays* were somehow found wanting," Fred Davis wrote in his classic study of nostalgia, *Yearning for Yesterday*. "[A] *disease* had to be invented to replace what up until that time had, we can assume, been regarded as an unfortunate though familiar vicissitude of life," he argued.[14] People everywhere have long understood that yearning for home can be quite painful; it could even make you jump ship. It's no wonder that Hofer saw what was happening to Swiss mercenaries through the medical lens of his time and subsequently categorized it as a treatable disease. The combination of growing armies that needed large numbers of men to fight, the birth of

modern medical care, and scores of homesick soldiers who were likely dying from other causes all led to the creation of the word “nostalgia.”

However, this still ignores an important query regarding nostalgia: why is it no longer considered a disease? People used to die from it — what happened? Did they really die from nostalgia, or something else?

No one can say for sure. All we know is that nostalgia was once clinical in the eyes of medicine. Death certificates of soldiers indicated nostalgia as the cause, and the disease worried physicians well into the twentieth century. Beyond just yearning for home, symptoms also included inflammation of the brain, night sweats, and convulsions.[15] It proved to be a major problem for military leaders, who feared it could wipe out soldiers’ morale or, worse, the soldiers themselves. No longer merely a Swiss disease, nostalgia eventually broke out among French revolutionary and Napoleonic armies. It swept through British troops in India in the mid-nineteenth century. The spread of Empire helped facilitate the epidemic of nostalgia, and the farther from home the mission, the deadlier the outbreak.[16]

The word nostalgia eventually crossed the Atlantic Ocean and spread like a virus through Union troops in the Civil War. But nostalgia had been on the continent since the arrival of colonists, albeit under a different name. In pre-Revolutionary America, if one were to talk about nostalgic feelings, they would likely use the term “homesickness,” as the word nostalgia hadn’t yet arrived in the colonies.[17] It was only after the Civil War that Americans started using the word “nostalgia” to mean homesickness, and like everyone else afflicted, they too began to realize there was no returning home. The railroads made things better and worse: you could return home relatively quickly, but you couldn’t *go back*. In other words, the homesickness might be cured, but not the nostalgia.[18]

Emotional Drift

If the death certificates are correct, no one has died from nostalgia since the late nineteenth century — not because nostalgia became less deadly, but because there was no cure for it.[19] Physicians couldn't figure out how to classify it, and so, drifting without medical grounding, it was utilized in different ways to accomplish different goals.[20] Insecure French military physicians of the eighteenth century tried to gain institutional respect by framing the study of nostalgia as cutting-edge medical research.[21] Eventually it became a more psychiatric concern, an obstacle impeding optimal human functioning. In his *Principles of Adolescent Psychology* from 1935, Edmund S. Conklin argued that the only cure for nostalgia was hard work. "Preoccupation with work means exclusive attention to the present situation and the exclusion of thoughts that arouse conflict," he wrote, underscoring that "hard work is the best way to achievement."[22] This, of course, didn't cure it because nostalgia often comes from overwork, and a prescription for more work just made the nostalgia worse.[23] And so, corporations jumped at the chance to commodify the nostalgic feelings all that hard work had produced, encouraging workers, when they clocked out, to purchase the latest products that reminded them of the good old days.

You're less likely to rush off to the hospital today if you feel nostalgic. Instead, you'll probably watch an old movie, or listen to some music from your childhood. But that doesn't mean two people will feel nostalgia the same way, nor are they guaranteed to act on it similarly. Because it's an emotion, nostalgia can be directed differently by different people, depending on their aims and the obstacles standing in the way.

To clarify, let's think about anger. Anger is relatively simple compared to nostalgia. We can map out anger, we know its appraisal cues, and we understand its action tendencies. We also know it can be good or bad. We don't question whether we should feel anger like we do with nostalgia, because most of us know deep down that anger can be productive or

unproductive. We can channel anger in a prosocial way by surveying the world around us, seeing that things are bad, and fighting to make it a better place. Much of my writing is fueled in part by anger: anger at the status quo, the problems with capitalism, and the injustices of neoliberalism. But anger can also be anti-social. You can get angry at a partner or a friend, say things you don't mean and can't take back, and suddenly your relationship is over. Even though it can be shaped in negative ways, we don't want to get rid of anger, and we shouldn't want to get rid of nostalgia either.

And yet, many people distrust nostalgia. They associate it with conservative politics and movements that trick people into ideologically backwards mindsets. At times, it seems like nostalgia never moved on from its status as a disease.

In their book *Anglo Nostalgia: The Politics of Emotion in a Fractured West*, Edoardo Campanella and Marta Dassù frame nostalgia as a "global malaise" that must be treated by providing the world with a "reality check."[24] They believe that nostalgia is something we can overcome, that it obscures reality and interrupts our lives not unlike its original clinical understanding. Their case study is Brexit, which was fueled by a jingoistic strain of nostalgia "for the days when the British Empire ruled the waves."[25] Nostalgia can definitely serve reactionaries well, and it shows up in political rhetoric all the time, drawing groups of people together over shared objects of nostalgia. However, historian of nostalgia Gary Cross thinks otherwise. In *Consumed Nostalgia*, Cross writes that people today are actually no longer nostalgic for politics, the homeland, or religion.[26] They only feel nostalgic for consumer goods: things like toys, muscle cars, and old TV shows, which fail at building community but succeed at "[cutting] people off from others, even the ones they want to relate to."[27] He calls this "consumed nostalgia," which doesn't fuel "intolerant tribalism" but "creates mostly an exuberant individualism."[28]

Arguing over whether nostalgia is either a global malaise in need of a reality check, or the atomizing force of consumerism, misses the point. You can't live without nostalgia in the modern world any more than you can live without anger. It is part of our emotional experience, and for every jingoistic campaign to cordon off a country from migrants, there is also a hot rod collector who just likes old cars. They're both influenced by nostalgia, but they direct it towards different goals. And these seemingly incompatible views are actually deeply intertwined. The hot rod collector might discuss intolerant viewpoints with other enthusiasts at a weekend car show. This might even create a community of sorts, albeit one founded on fear and prejudice. Or the car collector might talk about sports or movies, which are both political (everything is). The point is, plenty of people are still nostalgic for politics, religion, and muscle cars, and a reality check won't wake them up from the emotion.

To illustrate how different groups wield the politics of nostalgia differently, take the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections. In 2016, Donald Trump promised to "Make America Great Again" if elected president. At the time, this nostalgic pledge resonated with millions of Americans, including many rich, white elites who trusted that Trump would protect their wealth. But it also resonated with those who yearned for the days when industry was mighty, gender was fixed, and whites could say and do whatever they wanted. Once elected, though, Trump altered the slogan to "Keep America Great," a phrase that satisfied his supporters for most of his presidency — until 2020, when COVID-19 started killing Americans, the stock market crashed, and unemployment skyrocketed. In a matter of months, America didn't seem so great, so Trump and his team brainstormed alternative slogans. But phrases like "Transition to Greatness" and "Great American Comeback" didn't ring as true for millions of Americans in 2020 as the familiar nostalgic promise to "Make America Great Again" did four year earlier.[29]

Joe Biden, on the other hand, relied heavily on nostalgia during his 2020 campaign. He told stories of his days as vice president, when he and then-president Barack Obama were a charming dynamic duo fighting to make the country better. On the campaign trail, Biden's rhetoric hinted at a return to Obama-era values and civility, those halcyon days when so many neoliberals believed life in the US was less stressful and things were better because Trump wasn't in the White House. Even one of Biden's campaign slogans, "Build Back Better," was a nostalgic call to arms. The phrase suggested that, instead of merely returning to the past to make America great again, Biden would rebuild the country better than it was before.

Both elections were battles over which pasts to feel nostalgic for. Trump and Biden each constructed their own rhetoric of nostalgia to position themselves as America's saviors, thus shaping the emotion in different ways. And so nostalgia itself isn't simply a political tool to manipulate people and draw them into a cul-de-sac where they amble round within a closed loop of ideas. But it isn't merely a love for hot rods and old sitcoms, either.

Boym's Typology

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym identified two tendencies of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. "Restorative nostalgia," she wrote, "protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt."[30] Restorative nostalgia privileges heritage over history. It's marked by a fear that the present is in danger and that something nefarious is afoot, an evil conspiracy that threatens to shatter the unsecured homeland, sully its purity, and call its safety into question. The restorers are driven by an obsession with maintaining the comfort and familiarity of the homeland, so they spin elaborate myths of nationalism to ensure that everyone supports the same values — that is, the values of patriotism, religion, and good fences (or

border walls).[31] Restorative nostalgia wants to reclaim the things that have been lost, by any means necessary, and it does not accept the futility of such an endeavor. But attempts at total restoration tend to fail, sometimes spectacularly. The distance between past and present is always there, but restorative nostalgia refuses to acknowledge it. This can be seen in the various efforts to restore older works of art, like the botched restorations of Elías García Martínez's *Ecce Homo* in 2012 and Bartolomé Esteban Murillo's painting of the Virgin Mary in 2020. In the name of restoration, both paintings went from weathered to cartoonish.

Restorative nostalgia seeks to uncover the grand conspiracy of history. It is the nostalgia of the *National Treasure* franchise and *The Da Vinci Code*, but also of various far-right, neofascist, and conspiracy groups.[32] Very often, restorative nostalgia is the emotion of the jingoists who try to convince large groups of people to follow them into a nightmare past. And so, it tends to pair well with racism, prejudice, xenophobia, and colonialism.

Reflective nostalgia doesn't take itself so seriously. It's often more interested in the distance between past and present than in the origin point buried somewhere in the past. Reflective nostalgia "has elements of both mourning and melancholia," but it's far more playful than its restorative counterpart.[33] It "delays the homecoming," focusing instead on "ruins [and] the patina of time and history."[34] It relishes ambiguity, contradiction, and subversion.[35] It mocks the restorers, laughing at their fool's errands to relive their childhood or revive their supposedly dead country. It often pairs well with irony.[36] Irony can be the sugar that makes the bitter pill of nostalgia easier to swallow, for it prevents all those icky feelings of sentimentality from getting too close.[37] The distance irony gives nostalgia can cause some to adopt a cool, detached stance, sometimes frustratingly apolitical (signified by the pop culture-appropriating hipster, who wears an item of nostalgic clothing because it just looks cool) and sometimes

frighteningly partisan (like the online troll who produces electronic music celebrating neo-Nazis that other trolls listen to before they participate in a deadly far-right protest in real life). This is to say, ironic nostalgia isn't always less dangerous than the restorative kind.

Boym clarifies that these nostalgic tendencies "are not absolute types."[38] And yet, to this day, her "typology", as she calls it, is often cited as the essential framework for understanding the emotion.[39] Certainly, it accounts for nostalgia's emotional paradoxes, and because of that, it can be quite useful to think of nostalgia in reflective and restorative terms. But is nostalgia always so bifurcated, so binary? Boym's typology can help us grab nostalgia by the tail, but the emotion itself is far too complicated to be explained dualistically. Nor can we always easily "separate out progressive and anti-essentialist nostalgia from reactionary, non-ironic nostalgia," as Alastair Bonnett has argued.[40] Elements of reflective irony can show up in restorative missions; the two can't be so neatly cleaved.

Even splitting nostalgia into several types, as Fred Davis does in *Yearning for Yesterday*, doesn't really make room for nostalgia's fluidity, or the fact that it can change with the times like other emotions. Davis wrote of "ascending orders of nostalgia": simple, reflexive, and interpreted nostalgia.[41] Simple nostalgia is the kind that lures you into believing the past was better and happier.[42] It is perhaps the type we first imagine when we think about nostalgia. Reflexive nostalgia is more self-aware. It's the kind that makes you pause and question whether things really were better in the past.[43] Davis likens it to a "Greek Chorus wanting to question, deflate, correct, and remind."[44] And then there's interpreted nostalgia, which questions the very feeling of nostalgia itself. Interpreted nostalgia wants to know why a person yearns for yesterday, not whether yesterday is worth yearning for in the first place.[45]

Instead of dividing nostalgia into types of two or three, and then matching examples to them, perhaps we should finally acknowledge that

there are many flavors of nostalgia, each with its own object of desire and level of intensity. And there are different genres of nostalgic discourse, from the presidential inaugural address appealing to the homeland, to the nostalgia film, to the public monument honoring an important leader. Each nostalgic genre has its own aims and obstacles, and people will use different resources to overcome those obstacles and meet their aims, whether it's marketing a political candidate with a catchy nostalgic phrase, or promoting the latest film reboot. You'll see in this book some of the different uses of nostalgia; some are quite reactionary, others more progressive. At times, it might be useful to talk about a "restorative nostalgia" or a "simple nostalgia" to describe how individuals and societies direct the emotion differently. But Boym was right: these aren't absolute types. The differences between shades of nostalgia reveal more about the structures of power that shape and share nostalgia than its very essence. In other words, nostalgia, like any emotion, is too complex to be sliced evenly into clean-cut categories.

Yearning for Utopia

One of the hallmark characteristics of nostalgia is its tendency to make one remember the past as a time of perfection, or, at the very least, a better time than the present. Scholars of nostalgia have noted these utopian aspects.[46] Nostalgia and utopia are indeed two sides of the same coin. This might seem contradictory at first. Utopian thinking is normally associated with futurism: the utopia is the perfect society to come, the one we must hope (and plan) for. Modern utopian thinkers typically find fault with contemporary society, and they concoct various schemes, some of them quite massive, to re-engineer it and make it better, perhaps even perfect. Utopianism is one of the guiding principles of the idealist, who only sees what they want to see. Of course, this is also the position of the nostalgic.

Thomas More's *Utopia*, where the word itself comes from, is an account of a remote island called Utopia, where people live communally and without (much) intolerance. Life in Utopia seems perfect. The laws are easy to understand, and there aren't many of them.[47] Utopians aren't judged by their physical appearance. They disdain hunting, which they consider "the vilest department of butchery."[48] But Utopia is no utopia. Slavery is used as a form of punishment, and citizens are subject to surveillance. A relic of the sixteenth century, and perhaps a satire, the island of Utopia doesn't appear very utopian to us today.

No one is nostalgic for More's Utopia, but plenty of people are nostalgic for some kind of utopia. Their utopia resides somewhere in the past: when life was simpler, communities were stronger, and jobs were more secure. Some think that with more powerful digital technology, they can escape into virtual pasts and finally live in their own personal utopia. But overwhelmingly, the belief in technological progress has not alleviated nostalgia.[49] As capitalism grew larger and brought along with it more invasive technologies, nostalgia's transmission rate actually spiked. Constant change placed people firmly within history's chaos; many could feel the vertigo of the Great Acceleration of the second half of the twentieth century. Once measured, time then became scarce. There was only so much of it to go around. And with half of your life spent working, there wasn't a whole lot of time to do anything. So under capitalism, time became commodified. How you spent your time mattered a lot to the corporate sector, who calculated time spent in terms of attention paid. Anyone who did not factor into the progress myth was out of step with history. They would be left behind.

By the end of the twentieth century, progress fatigue had set in. People everywhere were weary from accelerating into the future so quickly. As the year 2000 drew nearer, many were looking backwards in horror at what the twentieth century had wrought: genocides, world wars, dictatorial regimes,

and other atrocities. What horrors, many were wondering, would the next century bring? Writing in the 1990s, Robert Jay Lifton argued that what people were feeling was a kind of futurelessness, a millenarian belief that things were coming to a great and final end.[50] Individuals were beginning to lose faith in the future and instead started relying on the relative stability of the past to get through the present. Lifton wrote that 9/11 aggravated this sense of futurelessness by revealing that the US wasn't immune from sudden, horrible dangers. The crises of the twenty-first century, from economic collapses to viral pandemics, seem to have only made the futurelessness worse, leaving us skeptical of the risks the future brings with it. And so, as Zygmunt Bauman wrote, the West no longer dreams of utopia but of retrotopia: a utopia in the past, where security and freedom can once again be reconciled in this age of nostalgia.[51]

Bowling Alone Together

So what is nostalgia? It's an emotion of intense longing for things lost. It's a yearning for a place you can't get back to, because we are prisoners of the present. It's a longing for stability and autonomy after losing control. It's also a quiet reflection, a slight ache for the old days. Or it's an ironic pose dressed up in a graphic tee with the 1990s-era Chicago Bulls logo printed on it. It can fill you with awe or mourning. It can also drive you to commit strange and atrocious acts in the name of restoration.

Ultimately, nostalgia is one way we can fight against finality and come to terms with the devastating knowledge that some things disappear. Places change, faces look different. Once left, home isn't quite the same when we return. Our defense against these dreadful feelings is nostalgia for the way things were. These are human feelings, and they can be unsettling, even painful. At times, we might consider jumping ship to pursue our nostalgic sirens, or endorsing abhorrent missions to remake the past in our own

nostalgic image. Or we might retreat inward to escape the destructive tide of history.

One of my last memories before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic was bowling with some friends. That particular Saturday was “80s Night” at the local alley, a marketing tactic that seemed to pander to the contemporary fascination with the decade. I promised myself to turn off that critical organ in my brain and just enjoy the experience.

When I walked into the lobby of the alley, something happened. The sound of crashing pins over Foreigner’s “Waiting for a Girl Like You,” while I watched young people, most of them in their teens, socialize, was dizzying. Had I stumbled through an exit out of this time? I couldn’t see a single smartphone. They were there, of course, but it was like my mind had erased them in order to make sense of this Eighties tableau. It was a surreal experience.[52]

I was struck with a similar feeling a few years earlier, in 2014, when my then-girlfriend and I indulged in a bit of nostalgic fun. We drove several hours south of Athens to a small town in central Georgia called Perry, to attend the Georgia National Fair — something I hadn’t done since I was a kid. I had graduated from college the previous year and was immediately hit with several overlapping life crises: a family emergency that threatened to tear us apart, a series of health issues that left my body aching day and night, and no job in sight.

We arrived at the midway with an hour left before closing. The lines were long, so as soon as we got off one ride we ran to the next, trying to hit as many as we could. By the time I realized just how much fun I was having, it was time to go. As we made our way to the exit, a lump rose quicky in my throat. I didn’t want to go, not yet at least. I was unaware how badly I needed an escape, even for only an hour. Just riding some rides, hearing the screams of laughter in the air, all beneath the dreamy lights of rollercoasters and carnival games — it didn’t heal my sick stomach or mend

my fracturing family. It simply permitted me the freedom to be free, for just one night.

There is nothing wrong with a little nostalgia. It can serve as a survival tactic in the harsh seasons of life. But like all emotions, the feeling can eventually grow malignant. Missions to restore the homeland, to live forever in nostalgia’s fantasy, can go horribly off the rails.

Chapter 2
In Search of Lost Time and Space

The displacement of modern individuals living through tumultuous times initiated the earliest recorded epidemics of nostalgia. At first, advances in transportation, like the invention of railroads, were considered the tonic for nostalgia. You could travel far from home, and then return rather quickly, as the space between locations collapsed. But faster transportation only made nostalgia worse. A swift return home only illustrated how quickly homes can change once they're left behind. The displaced couldn't return, and the itinerant couldn't remain. So the yearning turned temporal.

Nostalgia today is typically associated with time, but this wasn't always the case. The original, clinical understanding of nostalgia was a yearning to return home. It was the ache of Odysseus, "the greatest adventurer of all time," who, according to Milan Kundera, "is also the greatest nostalgic."[1] With time, however, nostalgia expanded. It became a special kind of homesickness, which meant the idea of "home" also expanded. Home no longer referred to the physical place where one lived and grew up, the region on the map where one's loved ones waited behind. Home became a fixed point in time, a place to which you could return but only partially, because homes aren't forever. They too change with the times.

Home is where we can plant roots. It isn't necessarily the place where we grew up. Plenty of homes are no homes at all. They are sites of domestic violence, trauma, and pain. Very few would be nostalgic for these homes. But many people desire a home, a place to feel grounded, so they make

their own homes instead. They might settle in a new place and call it a home. Without a home to go to, they are left wandering, searching for relief. Rootless and adrift, they long interminably for home, or they might support the mountebanks who promise it to them.

Parsing the politics of nostalgia means that we must also study the politics of time and space, home and history, while fully acknowledging that nostalgia collapses the boundaries between them. Anyone who has ever felt nostalgic knows this. Places are stained with history, and time periods are folded into places. Yearning for home as it *is* — that's homesickness. Longing for home as it *was* — nostalgia.

Lost in space and time, nostalgics can feel out of control. When people are forced from their homes, or when they're confined to a particular place, they might rely on nostalgia to cope. And when they feel like they have no control over their time, the result is often the same.

By controlling time and space, global capitalism keeps many around the world in a perpetual state of nostalgia. So many have been displaced by capital; they roam in search of homes and lost time. But capitalism and nostalgia are actually mutually constitutive, as Alastair Bonnett writes: "capitalism produces… nostalgia yet nostalgia offer[s] a compensation for, or refuge from, capitalism."[2] They exist in a feedback loop, and as conditions under capitalism have worsened, so too has nostalgia. These effects can be seen in the changing landscapes and perceptions of time in the modern world.

You Are Now Entering Nowhere

Georgia State Route 316 is a highway connecting Atlanta, the capital city, to Athens, the home of the University of Georgia. It funnels commuters who live in Atlanta and work at the university into the small city of Athens. Although you can find it on a map and many drive it every day, it is

nowhere, or at least that's how it feels. Driving down it is a bleak experience, with very few anchors beyond the construction sites, strip malls, and road signs to indicate where you are. There are towns along the way, but you pass adjacent to them, you don't go through them. There's no way to really know where you are. For that reason, drivers do their best to get through it as quickly as they can. No one wants to be nowhere, at least not for long. Trying to get to work or back home, commuters barrel down it at high speeds, and car crashes are common. At least five people I know have totaled their cars trying to dodge imposing semi-trucks and red-eyed racers.

Georgia 316 is an example of what Marc Augé calls a "non-place." Non-places are "transit points and temporary abodes" like hotel chains, supermarkets, airports, and retail outlets.[3] They are places of commerce that have helped create "a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral."[4] Non-places are where "individuals are supposed to interact only with texts," like road signs and credit card readers.[5] Nobody knows who you are in a non-place; you are, instead, alone together with others, anonymous, a ghost. "No doubt the relative anonymity that goes with this temporary identity can even be felt as a liberation," Augé points out, but it is really only the freedom of being no one.[6] This can provide a fleeting rush, the pleasure of invisibility, but it comes at a price, as "identity [and] relations" are replaced with "solitude and similitude."[7]

People are identified "only on entering or leaving" non-places.[8] This means that non-places "receive increasing numbers of individuals," which makes them prime targets for acts of terrorism.[9] But non-places incite violence in other ways. Those who employ violence in the name of totalizing beliefs see the inorganic non-place as "a negation of their ideal."[10] A non-place like Georgia 316 is also a particularly violent site because it's ruled by speed. It isn't the most enjoyable drive, so getting through it quickly encourages drivers to speed even faster, which inevitably

leads to injury and death. But non-places also violently interrupt a place by wiping out its local signifiers and replacing them with the false localism of gentrification.

It isn't uncommon for local residents to yearn for the way a place used to look before it became a non-place. When they first appear, non-places wipe away diversity and locality, causing some to grow nostalgic for a place before its corporate makeover. To soothe the corporate penetration of space and place, nostalgia-scapes are often built. These are artificial locations that are meant to anchor people to some kind of meaning by providing them a representation of roots. Disney's Main Street, USA, found in its parks around the world, is a nostalgia-scape.[11] Meme accounts on social media that post nostalgic aesthetics are themselves kinds of nostalgia-scapes, although they exist only virtually. Nostalgia-scapes are not public places, per se; they are instead controlled environments and planned communities, like Celebration, Florida, and Val d'Europe outside Paris (both built by The Walt Disney Company). They're manufactured to maximize consumption. Many flock to nostalgia-scapes to escape the anxiety of non-places, but they are themselves just as anonymous and commercial.

But thanks to nostalgia's sneaky nature, some might also yearn for non-places themselves. Even though we might not stop at a non-place, we "may pass by [it] again, every summer or several times a year, so that [it]… can become strangely familiar to [us] over time."[12] Once a non-place establishes itself as a kind of place, and then changes its logo or design, the familiarity is disrupted, and nostalgia very likely will set in. We might grow nostalgic for the way older fast-food restaurants looked, for defunct retail chains, or even for older social media layouts (social media, of course, being its own kind of virtual non-place). Bygone corporate branding, like an old Shell Oil logo or a retro Coca-Cola bottle, can elicit nostalgia, inspiring us to pump Shell gasoline or purchase Coke products to feel part of the past. After all, a brand's logo, Augé writes, is a "reassuring landmark."[13] Several

of the largest companies today rely on our nostalgia for these landmarks to soothe anxiety and draw us to make purchases.

Nostalgia-scapes and nostalgic branding are popular because corporate brands know that nostalgia is good business. Marketing researchers have correlated nostalgia with enchantment, or "the rendering of the ordinary into something special."[14] If a product is enchanting, people will likely consume it. Brands today also know the importance of heritage; a company will often induce nostalgia for its brand's own past, whether that past is invented by the company or not, or perhaps it'll relaunch an older brand and sell it as "retro."[15] Consumer scientists have found that "nostalgia creates social connection, which then generates psychological inspiration," thus leading to behavioral change.[16] In fact, nostalgia drives behavior change even more than the so-called "wow-effect," which is the "consumer experience of processing awe-inducing information."[17] In other words, we're more likely to buy something if it gives us that yearning feeling. (Although people who identify as innovative, and who are less nostalgic, are less likely to regard nostalgic marketing positively.[18]) And nostalgia "encourages consumers to part with their money," which may explain why advertisers rely on the emotion all the time.[19] "In the hands of marketers," researchers Benjamin J. Hartmann and Katja H. Brunk claim, "nostalgia appears to be the very fabric from which they fashion and promote brands and products, aspiring to promulgate consumer value across a wide range of market offerings."[20]

One of the greatest boons to corporate capitalism today is our nostalgia for disappearing commercial spaces. Take the indoor mall, for example. Once a surrogate for the town square, the indoor mall in the digital age has become a nostalgic site, much like dying video rental stores and skating rinks. Malls are considered nostalgia-scapes today, even though they weren't intended to be. Before the rise of online commerce an indoor mall was just another non-place, but it was a different kind of non-place than,

say, an airport. People used to congregate in malls to escape the suffocating solitude of suburbia. You could hang out with your friends, run into your neighbors, feel the energy of crowds. The mall wasn't always a place you wanted to leave quickly (except, maybe, during the holiday rush). You could get lost inside, drifting to the light rock played overhead, drawn by the scent of the food court. Today, many disconnected groups yearn for the collective atmosphere of the mall: a centrally-planned privatized space where people could, at the very least, shop in-person together.

There are still indoor malls you can visit, but they're not quite the same. Many of them are empty of both people and stores. Visiting a dying mall isn't very enjoyable, unless you delight in eerie experiences. Gazing at the outdated décor and empty food courts, you can almost sense the ghosts of yesterday's shoppers.

Many of us have childhood malls, the ones we grew up going to, that we often think of when we reminisce about them. Mine is still standing, but just barely. Most of the stores are long gone, and visitors usually come only to walk past the shuttered storefronts for exercise. I have plenty of memories from the days when it was bustling, but my last memory of its heyday belies any nostalgic revelry. I was a teenager, and my mother and I were somewhere on the first level, making our way to a nearby anchor store — when suddenly we heard gunshots. I looked up at the top of the escalator and saw people scrambling on the second floor. An officer waved his hands for everyone to get down. The up escalator quickly clogged with people trying to run down it, some almost spilling over the railing. My mother yanked me into a nearby fast-fashion clothing store, with its bright lights and piped-in pop music. No one inside had heard the gunfire. She asked if there was a back door exit, but none of the employees knew, so they shrugged her off. We huddled among the rows of denim and watched through the windows as shoppers quickly raced by, trying to get out of the mall, while inside the store it was like nothing had happened. Soon things

calmed down, but we didn't dare leave just yet. We stood perfectly still, peering through the windows, until we heard someone next to us: "Excuse me, can I grab those jeans behind you?"

Out of Control

A non-place is not just the opposite of a place; it's also the opposite of a home. Home isn't only where you feel safe but also where you can stay, where time can slow down, where you can relax (until the time comes to leave it). Non-places, on the other hand, are in-between places; it's hard to plant firm roots in non-places, because they incite movement.

The corporate domination of place and space has multiplied the number of non-places we must move through daily. This means many of us are overwhelmed and anxious, always having to hustle from one non-place to the next — even when we don't want to. A longing sets in: the yearning for stability and control over our own mobility.

Early victims of nostalgia, according to Thomas Dodman, were those who were disembedded from "a localized, dense network of social relations and exposed to new spatial and temporal regimes."[21] They were docile bodies plucked from familiarity and subsequently disciplined, given the "right to be fed" but subject to "the physical and moral constraints of confinement," as Michel Foucault wrote — like a citizen drafted into service or a prisoner.[22] They were also subjected to psychological and penal systems reflecting the positivist trends of the time, when human problems were considered matters of empirical science. By the turn of the twentieth century, nostalgia had begun to interest positivist criminologists, including Hans Gross, whose influential handbook, *Criminal Psychology*, was translated into English in 1918. Gross devotes a section to nostalgia, warning that "idiotic and weak persons" in particular suffer from nostalgia. "Hence they are easily led to crime, especially to arson," he writes, noting

that “uneducated people in lonesome, very isolated regions, such as mountain tops, great moors, coast country, are particularly subject to nostalgia,” because “educated people” are smart enough to “find diversion from their sad thoughts.” Gross’ most shocking theory is that nostalgic criminals are unaware that they’re nostalgic, so they’re unable to explain their own motives. He advises criminologists to keep nostalgia in mind “where no proper motive for violence is to be found.”[23] It is one passage in a long line of early-twentieth-century writings on the nostalgic subject as a “species of *homo criminalis*.”[24]

Modern society’s “laboring and increasingly mobile lot,” as Dodman calls them, were anything but immune from nostalgia.[25] Of course people traveled before the coining of nostalgia, but the migrants of Johannes Hofer’s day were forced to move for several economic and religious reasons, all against the backdrop of total war. And nostalgia didn’t spread from mobility itself but from the *anxiety* of mobility, from the question of who should be allowed to move, and the concern over what the movers brought with them. “This was, indeed, a strange century,” Jean Starobinski writes of the late eighteenth century, “in which the English in order to cure their spleen, fled their native air in search of the tranquil air of the South — while others believed that they were risking death simply by going away from their familiar countryside.”[26] Those who had to move frequently were often seen as suspicious, dangerous even, to the ones who had the privilege to choose between moving and staying put.

By the early nineteenth century, the French state was using surveillance measures to keep track of migrants. The “watchful gaze, extensive banning writs, and deportation orders” only increased nostalgia among them.[27] Coerced to uproot for various reasons, laborers, students, soldiers, and refugees were policed as part of a moral panic fueled by the fear of migration. At the same time, the disciplinary tactics of the French military crept into civilian life. The massive revolutionary and Napoleonic armies

became “incubators for a wider range of modern disciplinary powers,” where soldiers would learn to accept the loss of autonomy and boredom that would prepare them for later factory work.[28]

“[I]t is not surprising that it is among solitary ‘travellers’ of the last century — not professional travellers or scientists, but travellers on impulse or for unexpected reasons — that we are most likely to find prophetic evocations of spaces in which neither identity, nor relations, nor history really make any sense,” Augé writes.[29] The strange emotional responses to forced movement were already being felt in the seventeenth century, and they have persisted through the centuries since.[30] We generally feel nostalgic in response to a loss of autonomy, when we’re unexpectedly coerced to move. Sudden forced mobility can make us feel out of control, like we’re unable to live freely. Yet the problem with coerced movement isn’t that we’re made to move all the time, but that we’re told who can move, where they can go, and what they can do. And one doesn’t have to be ordered to travel to feel nostalgia. You can be told to stay put indefinitely, or told which places you can go and when.

The seasons of my life when I was the most nostalgic were those in which I felt the most out of control. I binged copious amounts of nostalgic media during these stressful periods: my first year at college, when I started graduate school, and especially during my youth. Some of my earliest memories are haunted by nostalgia. As a young person, I came to know the emotion quite well. This puzzled me for many of my adult years. Why would a child feel such intense nostalgia? What do young people have to be nostalgic for?

“It is important to understand the mathematical paradox in nostalgia: that it is most powerful in early youth, when the volume of the life gone by is quite small,” Milan Kundera writes.[31] The recent past is filled with more “firsts” for the child than the adult. There are a number of firsts that young people experience in a short span of time, and they can be particularly

intense: first kiss, first summer job, first car, to name only a few of the most memorable. By the time young people grow to adulthood, these firsts become fixed in memory, and some adults may long for the intense high they delivered in youth. Adults still experience firsts, of course — first marriages, the death of a parent, first child — but for a young person, pretty much every experience, major or minor, is a first.

But there's another reason why young people might experience nostalgia more frequently or more intensely: they generally feel out of control a lot of the time. They have very little say in their own lives and are constrained by various forces: school, parents, dead-end jobs that pay minimum wage, and so forth. When you consider nostalgia in this way, it makes sense why a young person with very little life experience could feel nostalgic. As much as I feel nostalgia for my youth, I'm also cursed with remembering its darker side. I never liked going to school. I was good at it, but I had no choice but to succumb to the grueling schedules and demands of being a student. Homework, standardized tests, no freedom to explore or imagine — these constraints were dreadful to me. I yearned to be free from them, and I felt nostalgic for some time, any time, before my own.[32]

Time's Handkerchief

While the displaced of the nineteenth century struggled to return home, they were also subject to changing conceptions of time. The international standardization of time in the nineteenth century solidified what used to be a more flexible understanding. Time became something you measured, spent, and saved. Even though the hours repeated daily, time itself marched forward, marked by advances in science and technology — the evidence of progress for many. We began moving inexorably towards something and away from something else. By the late Enlightenment, the Western world could distinguish future from past and anticipate unknown changes that

might be nothing like what came before. We learned that some things disappear, never again to return.[33]

Although species go extinct, loved ones die, and old media fall out of favor, not everything gets obliterated by the future. Some things come back like zombies. That is because time as we measure it doesn't always match time as we perceive it. Time doesn't always feel linear. Years tick by, but things don't always go forward. Rather, as Michel Serres indicates, time is "[f]olded, wadded up."[34] It's turbulent, chaotic — quite unlike the measurement of time, which, Serres notes, people tend to confuse with time itself.[35] Time is "gathered together, with multiple pleats," like a handkerchief, which Serres describes in a conversation with Bruno Latour:

> If you take a handkerchief and spread it out in order to iron it, you can see in it certain fixed distances and proximities. If you sketch a circle in one area, you can mark out nearby points and measure far-off distances. Then take the same handkerchief and crumple it, by putting it in your pocket. Two distant points suddenly are close, even superimposed. If, further, you tear it in certain places, two points that were close can become very distant.[36]

"Time doesn't flow," Serres argues. "[I]t percolates."[37] This means that "old ideas and arguments do not disappear when their chronological time… has passed," rhetorical critic Robin E. Jensen writes, "but, instead, percolate at subsequent, often seemingly disconnected moments to combine and contend with newer arguments, appeals, and narratives."[38]

This conception of time is similar to that described in *Sapphire & Steel*, the British science-fiction television series from the late-1970s. In the first episode, operatives Sapphire and Steel describe time as a force that can break into the present and influence people, objects, or anything else. Time is like a corridor with worn areas along its walls where the past, with enough pressure, can burst through and interrupt the present. It acts in this

way in order to perpetuate repeating status quos, to keep in circulation old ideas and narratives, and thwart the creation of the new. Throughout the series, Sapphire and Steel's mission is to keep time from doing this.

The bizarre folding of time is also seen in Krzysztof Kieślowski's film *Three Colours: Red*. In the film, a model, Valentine, meets and develops a relationship with a retired judge. Meanwhile, a law student, Auguste, discovers his partner, Karin, is cheating on him with another man. Throughout the movie, it becomes apparent that the judge is Auguste, even though Auguste and the judge exist at the same time in the film. The judge admits to Valentine that he too was a victim of infidelity as a young man and that his ex-girlfriend eventually perished at sea. He predicts that Valentine will meet a man and fall in love. At the end, Auguste and Valentine, who don't know each other, board a ferry, while Karin and her new boyfriend climb aboard the boyfriend's yacht. A storm hits, and the ferry and yacht both sink, killing Karin and her boyfriend. Only a few survive, including Auguste and Valentine, who, it's implied, will fall in love — fulfilling the judge's prophecy.

Serres' chaotic theory of time can also explain the persistence and reappearance of shocking ideologies that, to a believer of progress, should be left in the past. And yet, we know well that old prejudices do not die so easily. "Everyone is amazed that after 1935 the Nazis, in the most scientifically and culturally advanced country, adopted the most archaic behavior," Serres notes. "But we are always simultaneously making gestures that are archaic, modern, and futuristic."[39]

The peculiar characteristics of nostalgia lend some credence to Serres' theory. People talk of older fashions being "back in style," songs becoming popular again (perhaps more popular than they were the first time), random knick-knacks, once worthless, now fetching enormous sums. The claim that we are in the future, and so old prejudices shouldn't persist, is disproven by the percolation of time. Where the social fabric is worn thin, outdated

ideologies, sometimes suffused with hate and riding on the back of nostalgia, might break through. The past isn't somewhere far behind us; it's a point on a wadded handkerchief, folded atop our own little point. Even nostalgia itself is like a percolation from the past, a sentiment bubbling up from a period when time wasn't a tool to justify progress. But not all nostalgias all the same. What might percolate into the present is a monster everyone thought had been buried in the past.

Certain places and objects can open up holes in the present for the past to slip through. Experiment for yourself: go to a place that's old, perhaps an indoor mall that's long been forgotten, or maybe a Victorian house. These spaces with their objects and aesthetics of yore will transport you out of the present. Or, I should say, they will open up the space for the past to shine.

A few years ago, I wandered into an antique store outside Athens, Georgia. Crossing the door threshold, I walked back in time. Antique stores can transport their visitors to a vaguely defined "past," with their old furniture, sundries, and estate jewelry. This store was no different. Owned and operated by a retired couple, both former professors at the local university, the store was proof of Mark Fisher's idea that places are stained with "particularly intense moments of time," that it is this staining that gives a place the feeling of being haunted.[40] The store smelled of pipe smoke and old books. Guns from the Civil War hung on the wall. There was even a fossilized dinosaur egg (not for sale). This was a place haunted by the past, where time seemed to slow to a crawl. Walking out onto the street placed me firmly back in the present: equally out-of-time, but far more anxious.

Put enough outdated objects and aesthetics together, and you'll get quite close to achieving the dream of time travel. Every time I visit the antique store owned by the retired professors, I'm reminded of this truth. Some places, songs, movies, sights, sounds, and scents can come together in just

the right way to shatter the present's spell. What then crosses over out of the past is anyone's guess.

Dead Zones

When a non-place dies, it becomes a dead zone. The landscape of the modern world is littered with these dead zones: derelict malls, empty shells of former retailers, abandoned office parks, crumbling parking lots where the weeds break through cracks in the ground. Dead zones are stigmatized properties; developers won't touch them, and retail companies know better than to place one of their own stores in them, so they are left to decay before our very eyes. They are remnants from the past, frozen glimpses of the older landscape of capitalism now atrophying in the present.

Non-places destroy the uniqueness of a place. When non-places die, that uniqueness doesn't grow back. That's because non-places turn local environments into commodities; when the commodity has been used up, it's tossed aside. Then the search begins for new locations for non-places to colonize, often following the footsteps of white flight. Non-places go where the money goes, leaving behind food deserts, crumbling infrastructure, poverty, and a sea of dead zones. In a double injustice, dead zones can be revived with gentrification, imbuing them with a faux-uniqueness. Gentrification is more than just expensive fusion restaurants pricing low-income families out of their neighborhoods. It is, as Sarah Schulman writes, "a process that hides the apparatus of domination from the dominant themselves."[41] When we dine at the latest fancy taco bar in town, we don't have to see the destruction that had to happen for it to be built. This is the deal gentrification makes between the dominant and the public. "Gentrified happiness is often available to us in return for collusion with injustice," writes Schulman.[42]

Brand identities and heritages often replace diverse, local histories with corporate-approved pasts, and the result is a general homogenization of places. Cities across the West resemble each other: the same streets, different street names. A McDonald's on every corner. Amazon fulfillment centers on the periphery.

Homogenization privileges comfort and familiarity over difference and uncertainty. It provides the illusion of stability and control, two qualities that nostalgia spurs us to seek out in uncomfortable times. Although sticking with the familiar can be quite helpful and necessary at times, it can also encourage some to disdain discomfort and diversity, especially if they get used to feeling nostalgic all the time. But even though it can provide comfort to individuals, homogenization sows social instability, displacing people in the violent smoothing over of diversity. And it unleashes nostalgia among locals who long for their community as it was before its colonization by corporate capital.

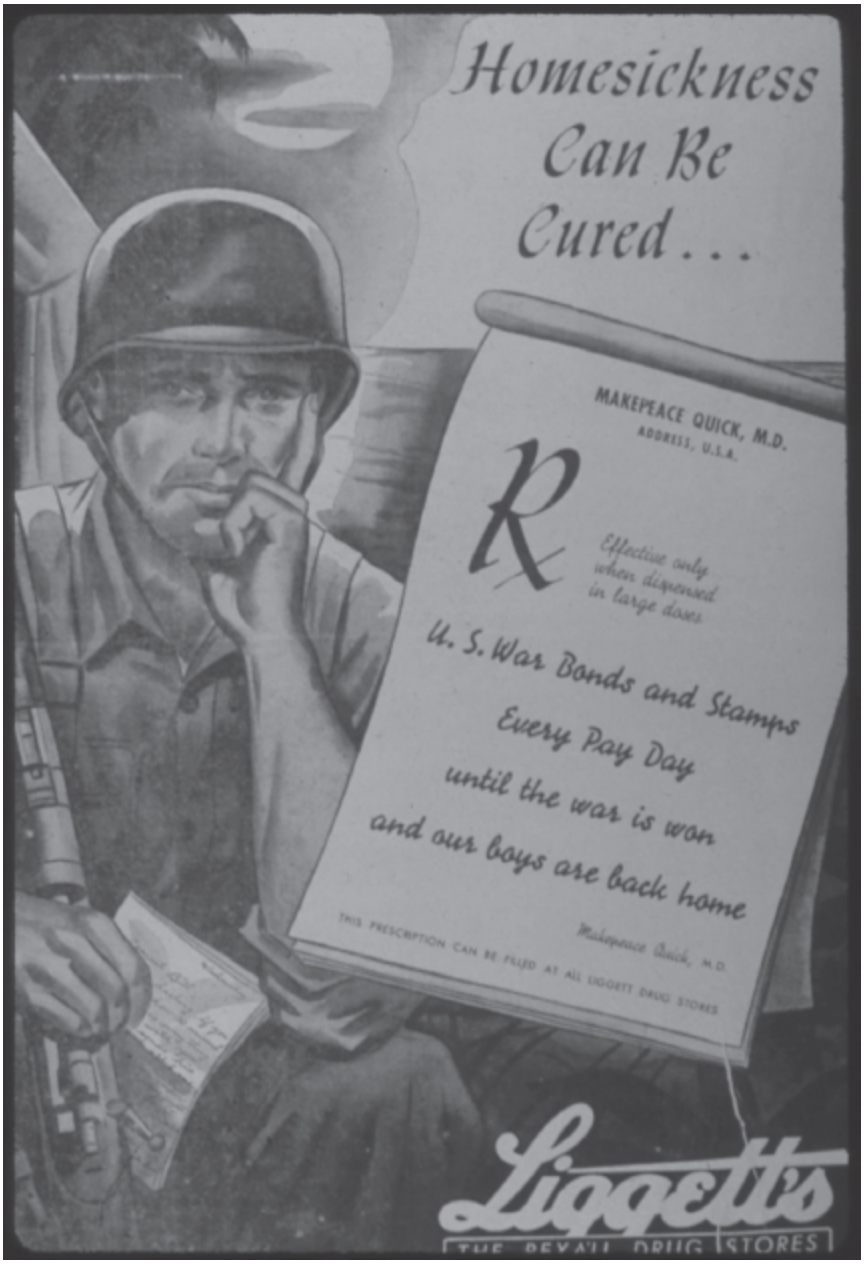
The landscape of non-places can change drastically, and quickly. Competition encourages swift adaptation, so your favorite coffee chain or supermarket will likely change shape just as you start to get familiar with it. But even the independent restaurants and stores often have to change to compete with the chains and big-box retailers, especially during economic downturns like the COVID-19 pandemic and recession. Local restaurants and bars in the US struggled to secure federal aid early in the pandemic, and once states started reopening after locking down, they had to adapt fast to survive: knocking out windows and roofs to encourage air circulation, setting up sanitizing stations at the front door, expanding take-out services, and establishing protocols in the event an employee caught the virus. These health and safety measures were crucial to implement in a country in which the virus had spread like wildfire. But I started to feel the slightest twinge of nostalgia for the way my neighborhood restaurants used to look before the

pandemic, and especially for the local businesses that were forced to close. I'll never get to visit them again.

Changing landscapes can trigger nostalgia, but the rapid turnover of places into non-places, then into dead zones, and then gentrified into undead zones, is enough to keep our nostalgia humming at a low-level most of the time. There's something comforting about a familiar place, like home, or your favorite neighborhood bar — somewhere you can go to be someone, to escape anonymity for a little while and be together with others, not just alone together. As Marc Augé has pointed out, non-places grant a person anonymity "only when he has given proof of his identity."[43] As a result, "the user of the non-place is always required to prove his innocence."[44] This can be exhausting, always proving who you are; sometimes you want to go where everyone already knows your name.

Non-places can certainly provide comfort, and brands can too. After all, we're embedded in capitalism, and many people love Starbucks and Amazon free shipping. These are companies only unfettered capitalism, with its exploitative supply chains, could have produced. They're innovative in that they meet a need: quick, cheap coffee or a last-minute book order. It can be liberating to dissolve into the background noise of a crowd in a mall, or to slip in and out of a supermarket without recognition. Drivers race down Georgia State Route 316 not just because they hate the drive but because they also love the feel of speed.

These non-places serve several purposes, and many of them we enjoy. But no one should spend their life as an anonymous ghost only, drifting from non-place to non-place, a nobody going nowhere. The result of this way of life is constant nostalgia — not just for the local, but also for diversity.


Homesickness
Can Be
Cured . . .
MAKEPEACE QUICK, M.D.
ADDRESS, U.S.A.
℞
Effective only
when dispensed
in large doses
U. S. War Bonds and Stamps
Every Pay Day
until the war is won
and our boys are back home
Makepeace Quick, M.D.
THIS PRESCRIPTION CAN BE FILLED AT ALL LIGGETT DRUG STORES
Liggetts
THE REXALL DRUG STORES

Chapter 3
Homeland Security

It was during the French revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars that nostalgia the disease first broke out on a large scale, plaguing countless soldiers during their service and haunting them back home. Military physicians scrambled to contain the intense form of homesickness as it ripped through the ranks, but the strange ailment could only be cured by shipping the afflicted soldiers home. Suddenly, the military had a major problem on its hands: how could men fight if they were sick and dying from a deadly mutation of homesickness? A nostalgic outbreak could mean the difference between victory and defeat. But to many of the soldiers, nostalgia wasn't a deadly disease but a coping mechanism that helped them survive the regimented conditioning of military life and the sheer terror of warfare.

Today we don't consider nostalgia a disease, but to the military of the Napoleonic era, nostalgia could kill. The top brass were afraid that an outbreak could level an entire unit. Whether or not nostalgia could really kill a person is beside the point. The truth is, we don't know whether French soldiers of the time actually died from nostalgia or from something else. What we do know is that there are soldiers' death certificates from the turn of the nineteenth century with "nostalgia" listed as the cause.

As large standing armies grew across Europe, nostalgia spread. These mega-armies were enormous, with millions of men enlisted, and capable of destruction on a scale never before seen.[1] They waged a new kind of war. Leaders ordered their men to defeat the enemy completely; the victor must

win with finality, totally and unequivocally, as a decisive victory was the only way to signal an end to the conflict. It was this kind of absolute, total war that Napoleon waged, and subject to these inflexible demands, soldiers were nostalgia-stricken.

The legacy of absolute war extended through the centuries, and its ghost haunts the Western world today. Although the US hasn't continued to wage decisive, total wars like it did during the Second World War, it continues to promote the belief that enemies must be vanquished completely and that only unconditional surrender will suffice. Total war in the twenty-first century has become perma-war: war that doesn't end, war that's everywhere, so it feels like it's nowhere. Perma-war has led to the militarization of society and, as a consequence, the rise of nostalgia.

It's important to know where ideas come from, not because the origins determine them, but because traces of the origins persist even as ideas mutate. If nostalgia were still a disease, pretty much everyone living would be sick. The emotion has changed drastically over the centuries, and its de-medicalization is a good thing. But some traces of clinical nostalgia persist into the present day, including its relationship to war.

A Sick Soldier's Sidekick

It was on the "rapidly expanding and ever-more-gruesome battlefields of eighteenth-century Europe" that nostalgia first appeared.[2] It made military leaders nervous and soldiers sick. Once they were afflicted, doctors had only a few options and limited time to pursue them. They could try bleeding the sick with leeches or mixing up herbal remedies, but these methods did very little to soothe the soldiers' persistent longing for home. French physician Jourdan Le Cointe proposed terrorizing the nostalgia out of soldiers by threatening to burn them with hot irons or bury them alive.[3] Doctors quarantined nostalgics, sometimes locking them in high towers to

breathe fresh air, but the isolation merely worsened the symptoms.[4] Most of the time, leaders tried to prevent nostalgia from breaking out, for once it did it was difficult to stop. They ordered soldiers to refrain from singing or whistling popular songs from back home, as they feared the familiar melodies might trigger an outbreak.

Military surgeon Jean Colombier worried that nostalgia might be unstoppable unless the French army changed the way it disciplined and regimented soldiers, who were wrenched from their homes and told to fight for their country.[5] These methods of enlistment certainly contributed to the rise of nostalgia among the ranks. The French military of the late eighteenth century was no longer relying as heavily on mercenaries and hired guns to fight battles. Instead, it drafted citizens to take up arms and serve their country, an abstract appeal to justify conscription. This caused a shift in the way citizens defined themselves. People were no longer *only* citizens in the eyes of the state, but soldiers too. This was the beginning of an era when soldiers were given rights and cared for by doctors, as their well-being was important to military command and necessary to sustain morale. But at the same time, it resulted in the blending of civilian and military spheres. To be a good citizen gradually meant you had to defend your homeland.

Once drafted into service, citizen-soldiers gained civic rights and healthcare at the cost of their identity. They not only had to fight decisive wars, but were expected to love doing it. “Perhaps more so than any other modern institution,” Thomas Dodman writes, “the French revolutionary army that came into being in the 1790s exemplified the problem of enlisting free and sentient individuals to willingly (and, ideally, joyously) subject themselves to a form of heteronomy, thus creating simultaneously free and unfree citizens, passionate and miserable soldiers.”[6] Citizen-soldiers were cared for with an iron fist. Fearing excruciating death in combat or from disease, they naturally wanted to go home — who wouldn’t? But seen as psychological subjects, they were thus considered a problem if they

exhibited behavior that actively resisted fighting. The solution for doctors was to discipline them into loving war.

The method didn’t work. Nostalgia couldn’t be contained, and soldiers were repatriated regularly, to return to their lives back home as mere citizens. But while they were at war, nostalgia was an ally. Many young Frenchmen relied on nostalgic reveries of home to endure the paradoxical process of conditioning and caring. When they returned home, however, nostalgia followed. What once sustained the men in wartime returned as its ghost in civilian life, a siren calling them back to the barracks. Molded into fighting machines, the soldiers couldn’t go back to their old lives, and they discovered that nostalgia, their emotional partner at war, wouldn’t easily leave them. Such is the peculiar power of nostalgia: you can be nostalgic for the experience that made you nostalgic in the first place.

Once at war, one cannot return home easily. And once nostalgia is let out of the bottle, it’s very difficult to put it back in. Nostalgia snowballs, each new experience wounding again what has already been healed. Diagnosing it was a way for physicians of the time to medicalize away any feelings that might threaten military service, but once soldiers returned from war, there was no way to stop nostalgia from spreading.

Remembering War

Turns out, patriotism isn’t always a sufficient reason to risk one’s life on the battlefield. As much as Americans romanticize the war efforts of yore, fought by brave young men driven by the love of their country, the truth is, it’s quite difficult to convince citizens to jump in a foxhole. The United States, for example, continues to wax nostalgic for the Founding Fathers and their revolutionary spirit, but early Americans were not so quick to take up arms against the British during the Revolution. Many who did enlist eventually deserted. “As a result,” historian Susan J. Matt writes, “the

citizen army had to be replaced with a professional one, well trained in obedience and duty and less likely to desert."[7]

By the Mexican-American War, American physicians were aware of nostalgia and its threat to the troops.[8] Later, during the Civil War, nostalgia broke out widely among citizen-soldiers, who discovered that combat wasn't a glamorous enterprise. It was in the "gaps between the ideals of warfare and the realities" that homesickness, a kind of cognate term in the US for nostalgia, festered.[9] Civil War soldiers longed to be away from combat, while simultaneously fearing that their feelings might turn fatal or, at the very least, be seen as unmanly.[10] Some were afraid of being judged by other soldiers or the folks back home.[11] Military physician J. Theodore Calhoun believed the only cure for homesick soldiers was to be ridiculed, laughed at, or ordered to man up.[12] Emotions of all kinds, especially those that threatened one's duty, were considered suspect — and rightly so, if you thought they might kill you.[13] Hundreds of thousands of soldiers ended up deserting, but prisoners of war were not so lucky.[14] Unable to go home, many of them died from nostalgia.[15]

The war had altered everyone's lives, whether or not they fought.[16] Those who didn't desert returned to postbellum life completely changed, and even those who stayed at home weren't the same.[17] It's true that more Americans moved about in the antebellum period, but mobile Americans after the Civil War were haunted by the realization that something enormously important had been lost. "The hope of reunion, either on earth or in heaven, that had consoled earlier generations was fading away in a secularizing society," Susan J. Matt writes of the Reconstruction years. "The loss of home, the necessity of movement, and the impossibility of return were becoming facts of life, but they were still painful facts to accept."[18]

By the turn of the twentieth century, war became even more psychological and bureaucratic. The military crystallized into a sprawling

regime of care, with different departments ensuring procedural continuity and overseeing new initiatives to boost the morale of soldiers, who were watched over by trained scientific personnel.[19] The First World War marked the "first time draftees made up a majority of the fighting force."[20] Soldiers were disciplined to be obedient to authority, and training became standardized.[21] As a result, American soldiers lost any sort of autonomy they had enjoyed during previous wars and were instead ordered to adopt a "corporate existence," which would eventually follow them from the trenches to the factories.[22]

Nostalgia was of little concern to the military staff of the First World War, partly because soldiers were often ridiculed for showing such unmanly feelings in the face of war. But commanding officers and military physicians also assumed soldiers had experienced the feeling of leaving home before. Unlike soldiers in previous wars, those fighting in the First World War were expected to be immune to homesickness.[23] It was shell shock, not nostalgia, that the military were concerned with and which they treated through harsh humiliation, electrocution, and other crude methods.

The Second World War saw widespread destruction and mass migrations across the globe. Its devastation tore a hole in the fabric of history, forever altering the world and making many of the survivors nostalgic in the process. Soldiers returning from the front often suffered from intense psychiatric conditions, including nostalgia, which was seen as a major threat to military prowess. In 1943, a paper was published in *War Medicine* on "cryptic nostalgia," a condition associated with absentmindedness and ill hygiene. Cryptic nostalgics were unaware of their condition and couldn't follow orders. The medical corps feared a loss of morale and fighting spirit if this pathological variant of nostalgia broke out among troops.[24] Homesickness was also recorded as a contributing factor to soldiers' mental and emotional breakdowns during the war.[25] Far from

disappearing as a clinical problem, the intense longing for home continued to worry the US military.

After the war, nostalgia lingered. There was a huge push to remember the events of the war, which resulted in the rise of reenactments, held by survivors and enthusiasts, and the creation of reenactment groups, such as the World War Two Historical Reenactment Society. The society is committed to breathing new life into history by "providing its members and the public with an authentic, safe time machine to the 1940s, using authentic uniforms, equipment, and vehicles."[26] War enthusiasts, many of whom weren't even alive during the 1940s, hold events, battle simulations, parades, and more to honor veterans and preserve history. Shortly after liberation, some Holocaust survivors started reenacting their experiences in concentration camps, a kind of participatory gesture to tell their own history as they remember it and one that continued over the course of the twentieth century.[27] Reenactment is a way for people to embody history, whether or not they lived through it. It is a nostalgic gesture, but of course, not every nostalgic gesture is the same. In 2010, Rich Iott, an Ohio Republican nominee running for the House of Representatives, and a favorite of the Tea Party movement, was photographed in an SS uniform that he liked to wear to Nazi reenactments.[28] He responded to public outcry by denouncing Nazism, assuring that he was merely interested in history. Perhaps that was true, but not every historical moment is worth reenacting.

Although nostalgia exploded after the Second World War, it was the Vietnam War that caused a more serious outbreak. Nostalgia was so rampant among American soldiers in Vietnam that some medical professionals considered re-medicalizing it.[29] Homesickness was strongest among draftees, many of whom had never ventured that far from home before, and so was anti-war sentiment.[30] At the beginning of the war, so-called "nostalgic disorders" were fairly uncommon, but as it dragged on, cases rose among increasingly bored and disillusioned soldiers, who spent

most of the Vietnamization period living a rigid military existence without any of the fighting. The casualty rate of nostalgic disorders was particularly higher in non-combat areas, leaving idle soldiers with plenty of time to reminisce about home.[31]

Vietnam veterans have reflected on their experiences in combat in different ways. Some reenact the war, as the 2015 documentary *In Country* reveals. The film explores the subculture of Vietnam reenactment by those who served and the ones who didn't. One reenactor, Charles "Tuna" Ford, spent tours in Iraq and Afghanistan but still enjoys the thrill of reenacting the Vietnam War. "It's such a crazy high, like, the adrenaline," he confesses. "Some people skateboard, some people ride fast bikes, some people shoot heroin. I go to war."[32]

Others write about war. Tim O'Brien's novel, *The Things They Carried*, is a collection of stories about his experience in the Vietnam War. Sort of. Over halfway through the novel, O'Brien admits that other than detailing his time as a foot soldier, "[a]lmost everything else is invented."[33] The stories throughout the book, he tells the reader, are made up, but that doesn't mean they aren't true. "[S]tory-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth," he writes. This is because stories "make things present."[34] Other than frustrating countless readers, the admission reveals a truth about why we tell stories about the past: "stories can save us."[35]

It doesn't matter if O'Brien's novel is true. We're always telling stories to understand the past, and oftentimes these stories are dressed in the emotion of nostalgia. Soldiers weather military life by telling nostalgic stories out loud or in their heads: stories of home, of relationships, of trauma. Wrenched from home and thrown into foreign lands, soldiers regularly rely on nostalgia. When they return home, they may look back as O'Brien does in his novel and tell the truth to others: the story-truth, not always the happening-truth.

The Dog and the Wolf

If you were a French soldier in Saint-Domingue in 1801, ordered by Napoleon to regain control over the rebelling colony, your nostalgia might have been spatial. You missed home; you didn't necessarily yearn for a different time. When you returned from the Caribbean, perhaps you were nostalgic for your time fighting. Maybe you didn't miss the island colony like you missed your home, but you might long for military life. This is how nostalgia can mutate. You can feel it when you're far from home, and when you return.

At the same time, one doesn't have to leave home to contract nostalgia. Staying home too long may sour your fondness of it. Homesickness might then become sick-of-home-ness. The sick-of-home may yearn for home like it was and disdain what it's become. Living in this "unhome," the feeling of the uncanny waves over them, followed by the drive to make things right as they were.

As a concept, the home is associated with nostalgia as much as "the past" is. That's because nostalgia is partly an emotional abstract for physical security. Home is where you're supposed to be safe. If nostalgia provides a makeshift comfort away from home, then home is the place to which you could return to let down your nostalgic guard and finally relax. Home for many people is a familiar haven, untouched by the harsh reality that made them nostalgic for it in the first place. And the yearning for a home is strong both for those who have a home to return to and for those who don't. But if the home becomes tainted, if the harsh reality on the outside penetrates the home's interior, then there will no longer be a safe place to return to.

This was the feeling of millions of Americans after 9/11. Al-Qaeda's coordinated terrorist attacks on the north and south towers of the World

Trade Center and the Pentagon destroyed a sense of safety and comfort in the country. Suddenly, everything was a threat, and no one felt safe.

You might not think about 9/11 every day, but it shaped the world in which we now live. And there was a time when it was on everyone's mind constantly. In 2002, when much of the public was still tense from the attacks, *The September 11 Syndrome* was released. Written by bestselling author and clinical psychologist Harriet B. Braiker, the book contained seven self-help steps for stressed individuals trying to adjust to what she called "the New Normalcy."[36] "The 'normal' we used to bank on is gone; living with risk and fear has become part of our New Normalcy," she wrote.[37] Since the American homeland had become potentially dangerous, she encouraged people to find comfort zones in their own homes, even suggesting they "[r]ent some great old movies on video or DVD" to calm their nerves.[38] But she warned that clinging too tightly to one's home might cut people off from each other. "We are trying to create greater comfort where we want to feel most secure — in our homes," she noted. "To a very significant extent, we are closing out the world, staying home and cocooning."[39] At the end of the book, Braiker pointed out that major crises will likely occur in the future and that her tips will continue to help us adapt to new normalcies. "[W]e must steel ourselves for the possibility — some say inevitability — that another attack may come. We all pray that never happens, certainly, but if it does and you find yourself in a more current version of the September 11 Syndrome, use these seven steps again and quickly."[40]

While self-help authors were coaching individuals through the trauma, political leaders devised a large-scale treatment for the public. In November 2002, President George W. Bush signed the Homeland Security Act, which did much more than create the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS). It also ushered in a new era by finally codifying a long understood myth: America is the homeland. Though US leaders had referred to the

country as the homeland before, once the term got fixed as an executive department, it became more than mere rhetoric. It would now justify missions and policies in the name of preservation.

Although it had always thought of itself as ordained by God, America after 9/11 shifted its rhetoric from righteousness to woundedness. The older progress narrative of manifest destiny would now be supported by a new kind of ideology in the twenty-first century. America would go forward by going backwards. Expanding into the Middle East and around the world, the country would play both sides: the flinching dog everyone is out to kick and the roving wolf on the hunt.

In his speech announcing the creation of the DHS, Bush invoked the dog and the wolf.[41] "They hate us because of what we love," he said, painting the terrorist enemy broadly as "cold-blooded killers." He referenced America's vulnerability throughout and its need for a stronger defense against future attacks. "The front of the new war is here in America," he said, and without homeland security, the country would be too weak to fight. With images of 9/11 seared into their minds, Bush's supporters had little choice but to believe him, especially when he became the wolf: "We're fighting a war against terror, with all our resources, and we're determined to win."

The National Strategy for Homeland Security, released in July 2002, was even more blunt. Terrorism, it claimed, wasn't the only threat. America suffered from an "enduring vulnerability" exploited by new and increasing enemies.[42] The report describes these enemies as all-knowing, all-seeing, always several steps ahead, and everywhere. They could be found in "schools, sporting arenas, malls, concert halls, office buildings, high-rise residences, and places of worship…"[43] They might flock to densely populated urban areas, but the report urges we must not forget the heartland, where acts of "agroterrorism" may occur. The enemy might use chemicals, radiation, pathogens, or cyberweapons. They can swim wide rivers, leap

over towering border walls, pilot planes, camouflage themselves as American citizens, engineer bacteria in labs, learn to split atoms, and then drop the bombs themselves. The report lists numerous destructive possibilities. About the only thing it claims with certainty is that terrorists "remain invisible, lurking in the shadows."[44] But, according to the report, there is one way to stop them: constant defense of the homeland, the most important mission the US government has.[45]

Bush helped create the DHS because he said there were too many departments doing similar work in security, and his solution was to group them together as one mega-department. But the creation of the department really did three things.

First, it opened the door for the private sector to take control of government matters. Naomi Klein has written that the DHS was built as a "hollow shell" and served as "the clearest expression of [a] wholly outsourced mode of government."[46] "Between September 11, 2001, and 2006, the Department of Homeland Security handed out $130 billion to private contractors — money that was not in the economy before and that is more than the GDP of Chile or the Czech Republic," she writes in *The Shock Doctrine*.[47] The result was a contracting frenzy. Startups of all kinds wanted in on the action: who can come up with the best technology to find and kill the next terrorist? Surveillance, facial recognition, and data mining became hot markets.

Second, the creation of the DHS changed the defense focus from countries to individuals. If enemies could be any*where*, they could be any*one*. This logic has led to ridiculous and humiliating arrests by the DHS's paramilitary force, the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE. In addition to separating migrant families at the US-Mexico border, ICE arrested professor Syed Jamal, who was granted the ability to stay in the country after a visa expired in 2011, and threatened him with deportation. The experience traumatized the professor and his children.[48]

Although it's supposed to be restricted from making arrests at "sensitive locations," ICE has routinely detained parents while dropping off their kids at school.[49] Even the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank co-founded by Charles Koch, called for the abolition of the DHS in 2014, because of its habit of descending upon individuals with armored cars and helicopters.[50] According to the DHS, even a vehicle that doesn't meet emissions standards can alert agents to swoop in. Over time, DHS forces operated more or less as a secret police force, apprehending individuals as threats of equal severity. Their conduct stemmed directly from former Vice President Dick Cheney's "one percent doctrine," which claimed that the US must respond to a one percent threat with one-hundred percent certainty. An individual threat, no matter how insignificant, now had national implications. This fear of individuals justified the actions of the DHS. Everything, including the most innocuous human activity, could be dangerous.[51]

Finally, the DHS and its official establishment of the homeland unleashed nostalgia onto the world. In the US, the concept of preserving the homeland became systemic, encoded into bureaucracy, crystallized as law. The mission of the DHS was to sniff out the conspiracies and target the conspirators. As Masha Gessen has written, the US homeland today continues to be "a place under assault, in need of aggressive defense from shape-shifting dangers."[52] Those who collect in the shadows, who wish to do harm to America, are always out to wound the homeland. Under constant threat, the homeland is never safe, which means there must be constant vigilance to ensure homeland security. Anxieties are heightened; you never know where the threat will come from next. Long periods of boredom are punctuated with bursts of violence. In the homeland, every day is war.

The longer the DHS has existed, the more aggressive and widespread the concept of homeland security has become. In 2020, Donald Trump referenced the homeland when he deployed DHS agents to apprehend

Portland protesters decrying the police killing of George Floyd. Trump "brought home the endless war," as Stephen Wertheim wrote at the time, by smearing protestors as the enemy. "Endless war has not merely come home; endless war increasingly *is* home," Wertheim wrote.[53] Well before Trump, but especially during his tenure, reactionaries across the country started considering *anyone* who disagreed with them the enemy, including members of their own party. But they especially targeted those from across the aisle, which has led to a constant battle between left and right and the feeling that bipartisanship is no longer possible.

Throughout the 2010s, the idea that the homeland must be secured, perhaps even restored, spread around the world. In the United Kingdom, fears of an insecure homeland animated the discourse surrounding Brexit. Drawing on homeland myths, jingoist leaders induced what Edoardo Campanella and Marta Dassù call "nostalgic nationalism." "The tiny majority of the highly polarized British population who voted Leave and were brainwashed with nostalgic national myths of past glories did not just want divorce from Brussels," they argue. Rather, the Leavers "wanted to return the United Kingdom to a time when the country was fully sovereign and simultaneously able to play a global role."[54] Jair Bolsonaro's former far-right political project, Alliance for Brazil, appealed to nostalgic nationalists by supporting "God, family, and homeland."[55] Viktor Orbán promised to turn Hungary into a "Christian homeland" in 2018 and, speaking to the Hungarian Parliament in 2019, declared that the "homeland cannot be in opposition," urging leaders across the country to cooperate with him at all costs.[56] Marine Le Pen ran for president of France in 2017 on the promise to protect the country by closing the borders; her National Front supporters would cheer "This is our home!" at her election rallies.[57] These far-right leaders invoked the homeland to justify nationalistic sentiments, but underneath the rhetoric was old-fashioned xenophobia and

hatred, leading some to brand them as twenty-first-century fascists — a fitting label, since fascism is coerced nostalgia for the homeland.

Perma-War

American leaders have long used conspiracy as a tool to divide and scare populations. From the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings of the mid-twentieth century to the Cold War paranoia of the 1980s, American politics is fueled by anxiety. Problems in the US are caused not by failures of crony capitalism but by shadowy figures, who are framed as totally evil. Patriotic Americans are the good guys, and it's the duty of the good guys to fight against evil.

Once evil becomes personified, militarization follows, as all facets of life are mobilized to support the cause: total victory against evil. Animated by the ghost of absolute war, the "possibility of clear-cut victories" against pure evil became a full-fledged pursuit by the turn of the twenty-first century.[58] During his presidency, George W. Bush referred to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as the "axis of evil." He believed they, and other enemies like them, were conspiring against the US and would do whatever it took to destroy it. So American leaders demanded war. Political leaders across the aisle continue to assert that war must be waged against each enemy until evil is finally vanquished. But the enemies keep coming, as Bush noted in his 2002 speech. They multiply faster than they can be killed. Drugs flood the streets, so there must be a war on drugs. Arts and culture challenge the status quo, so there must be a culture war. It doesn't even matter if crime rates rise; if a leader says they do, then there must be a war on crime. The tactic of terrorism threatens the country, so there must be a war on terror. The present-day result of this militaristic rhetoric is clear: to be a good citizen is to defend the homeland from evil.

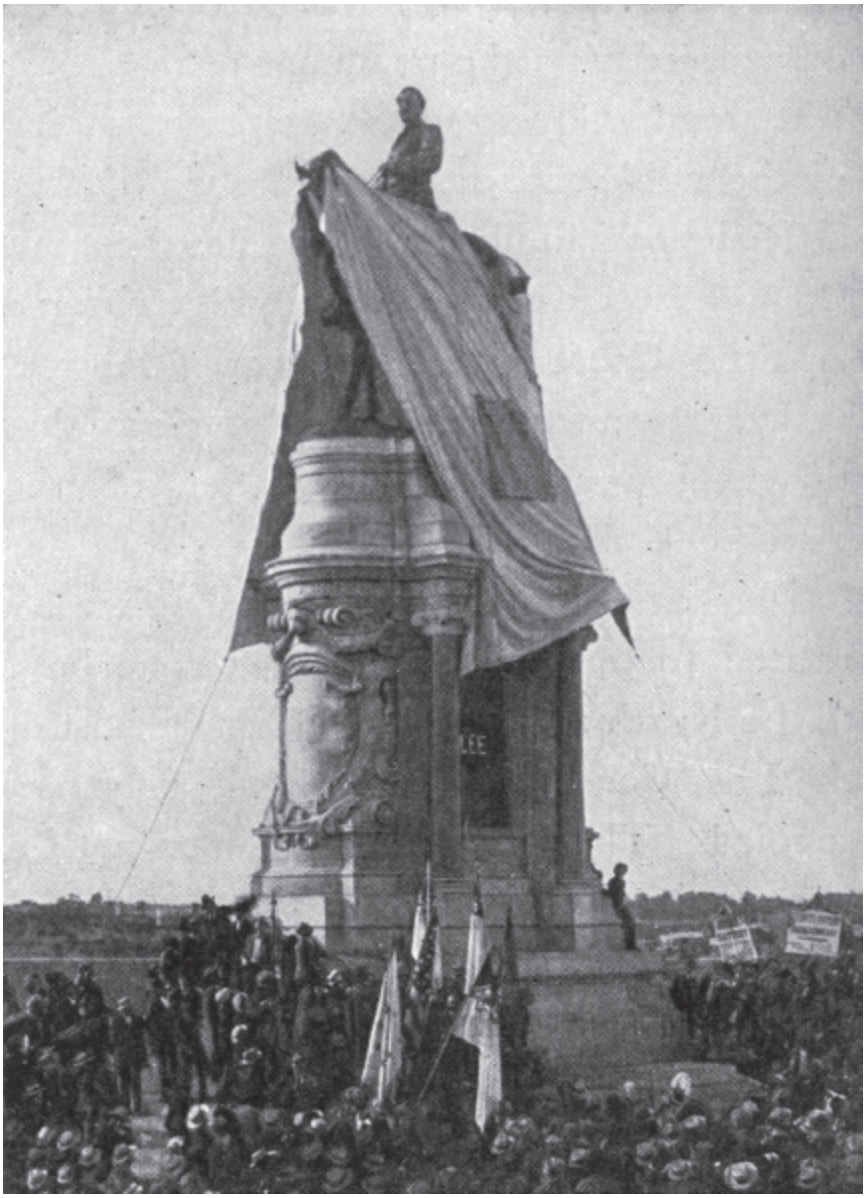
And with increased militarization came increased nostalgia. Ever since the homeland was codified as a governmental department, the US has suffered an intense nostalgia for a homeland always at risk of disappearing. To some extent, this is no surprise. Nostalgia as a disease appeared in the military first, breaking out widely among citizen-soldiers who were drafted to fight for their homeland. They didn't suffer only because of fighting; nostalgia wasn't a physical response to combat stress like shell shock in the First World War. It resulted from *military life*: long static periods interrupted by the sheer panic of imminent destruction, idle anxiety punctuated with fear. Soldiers coped with this way of life by yearning for home. Since 9/11, Americans have been living a similar kind of military life, mobilized in support of the cause, fearing the next attack without necessarily engaging in physical combat.

Militarism in the US extends everywhere, from politics to culture and beyond. Leaders speak the rhetoric of war while epic battles between good and evil play out in movies and games. "Militainment", as media critic Roger Stahl calls it, sells the experience of war and serves as a promotional tactic for the military.[59] Video games, drama series, and mainstream cinema encourage viewers to identify with the good guys, whether they're the American sniper charged with eliminating combatants one by one, or the comic book superhero who fights with his team against a cabal of villains. The militainment industry often works with the US military to provide aircraft, weaponry, and shooting locations for its films, and if a film is too critical of the Pentagon or the Central Intelligence Agency, for example, it'll likely be shelved. The films that *are* military-approved are sometimes promoted by the military itself. In 2019, the Department of Defense marketed *Captain Marvel* by linking the film's catchphrase, "higher, further, faster," with the US Air Force's motto of "Fly-Fight-Win."[60]

There has yet to be a need to draft US citizens into military service because the militainment industry has been so successful at recruitment. In

older disciplinary societies, conscription funneled citizens into armed service. Conditioned into docile bodies, citizen-soldiers were subjected to institutional mechanisms of power. If they left military service, they simply moved from one disciplinary regime to another: from the barracks to the factory. In societies of control, the new way is less enforcement, more propaganda. The massive promotional apparatus of the militainment industry has effectively rendered conscription obsolete. Although militainment feels less coercive, because young people in the US aren't being drafted into service, the forces of military control are no less strategic, and the conditioning is still happening — it's just no longer relegated to the barracks. Military resocialization extends outwards into society, turning everyone into soldiers and every social problem into combat.

War in the early twenty-first century seems both near and far away. Proxy warfare, shadow maneuvers, and extrajudicial drone strikes place the combat *over there*. At the same time, war permeates the culture at home, as militarism defines nearly every area of social life. In the process, citizens come to accept all kinds of strange, stressful, and intrusive practices, from constant surveillance to the transfer of surplus military weaponry to local police forces. The defense of the homeland has led to this perpetual war culture, where war is fought permanently, everywhere. But there is no end to a war to secure the homeland, no victors and losers, because there will always be another enemy. The irony is, the more the US occupies foreign nations, the more the homeland is threatened and the worse the nostalgia for it gets.



Chapter 4
Lost Cause

The captains of slave ships in the Middle Passage were puzzled by the emotional reactions of captive Africans. They had no name for it, but one of the emotions slaves experienced aboard these vessels was an extreme form of nostalgia. Forced from their homes and packed into cargo holds, stripped naked and with tight bilboes around their ankles, lying in waste with little room and vulnerable to disease and trauma, slaves headed for the Americas were forcibly subjected to control mechanisms that denied their right to life. To cope with the sudden, horrific break from freedom to bondage, some sang melodies from their homeland. Others threw themselves overboard in a desperate attempt to return home.[1] Abducted Africans were now caught in the gyre of capital, experiencing the future shock of modernity, and the rapid outbreak of yearning among them was an attempt to preserve their history that was beginning to disappear over the horizon. This intense, aching sadness for home looks a lot like nostalgia to us now. At the time, however, slave traders thought otherwise.

Before the Civil War, white slaveowners believed that Blacks were incapable of homesickness, which was most likely the word used at the time, since the word “nostalgia” didn’t appear in America until closer to the war. “As early as the eighteenth century,” Badia Ahad-Legardy notes, “there existed a biomedical belief that African-descended people did not maintain the psychological capacity to experience nostalgia,” which leaves us in the present with a “dearth of analyses on nostalgia in relation to

African American people" of the time.[2] Ahad-Legardy speculates that whites in the eighteenth century likely "held such a negative view of Africa that they could not imagine it as a home worth being missed."[3] It certainly wasn't the first time whites had considered people of color to be incapable of forging attachments to home. Andrew Jackson believed Native Americans were too "savage" to feel the same emotional connection to their homes as whites did. Susan J. Matt writes that Jackson considered their forced migrations in the nineteenth century "no different from those [migrations] whites undertook voluntarily," even going so far as to argue that Native Americans should celebrate their removal, since they were receiving acres of Western land from the government for free.[4]

To slave-owning whites, Blacks lacked the emotional intelligence to feel homesick. This assumption allowed whites to reduce Blacks to mere property; a thing, after all, doesn't feel sick for home. If slaves did present symptoms of sickness, they were considered slave disorders, diseases that reinscribed their lower status. They may have been seen as property to the planter class, but they were humans nonetheless — so physicians of the time medicalized their health accordingly. This too reinforced Blacks as lesser. A slave who wanted to be free, for example, had so-called drapetomania: madness to flee the plantation, a strictly Black disease.[5]

In addition to positioning Blacks as property that could get sick, white patriarchal society subjected slaves to a kind of temporal regime. On the plantation, slaves lived according to clock time, a burgeoning understanding of time in the 1800s which, as Mark M. Smith writes in his analysis of "clock-based time consciousness" during the era of slavery, "could inspire discipline and obedience in a slave workforce that was always trying to upset plantation order and jeopardize planters' profits through individual and collective acts of resistance." The lives of slaves were regulated with strict scheduling, and the clock became its own kind of master, as slaves were forbidden to own timekeeping devices themselves. "Simultaneously

tyrannical, modern, and profit-oriented," Smith notes, "the nineteenth-century clock and its attendant ability to rationalize and order the behavior of human beings became the planters' weapon of choice in their ongoing battle with their chattel."[6]

After the Civil War, the position on Black emotion changed: Blacks were criticized for being *too* homesick to move forward in society and for lacking the ambition of whites to deserve the same freedoms in America.[7] Anytime they wanted to exert control over Black folks, dominant whites simply changed the ruling opinion on Black emotion. Yet even though they accused Blacks of being stuck in the past, many whites couldn't move on from the antebellum days. From Reconstruction through the era of Jim Crow, nostalgia for the plantation was induced through a variety of white-authored propaganda, from minstrel shows to reenactments of the "good old days" to the erection of monuments honoring Confederate leaders. This Lost Cause nostalgia portrayed the southern United States as a region that was much better off before the Civil War, when "social and racial hierarchies were intact."[8] Refusing to believe in the role slavery played in the Civil War, many Southerners referred to the conflict as the "War of Northern Aggression." Whites attended minstrel shows where actors in blackface sang songs like "Dixie": "I wish I was in the land of cotton/ Old times there are not forgotten/ Look away, look away, look away, Dixie Land." Later, both *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and Disney's *Song of the South* (1946) portrayed the plantation as a cordial idyll where folks might pass the time on a front porch while being catered to by Black servants. To this day, as media scholar Tara McPherson notes, the South "remains at once the site of the trauma of slavery and also the mythic location of a vast nostalgia industry."[9]

It's a cruel act to write history by declaring once and for all the emotional state of a group of people, and yet that is exactly what happened after the Civil War and through the twentieth century. The Lost Cause

propaganda campaign circulated the myth that something essentially Southern didn't survive the Civil War, that, in fact, a distinctly Southern element or two had been lost when slavery ended. This backward-looking gesture was materialized through cultural artifacts like songs, stories, and statues, which, taken together, did nothing short of waging a war on memory and spreading a sick current of nostalgia that taught whites to "look away" to Dixie. *Look away*, indeed — as in, turn away from the historical reality of bondage.

One of the strategies for publicly circulating Lost Cause nostalgia was to erect statues to former slaveholders and secessionists throughout the country, but especially in the Southern states. Starting in the late nineteenth century and continuing through the height of Jim Crow, these statues went up in town squares from Opelika to Richmond. But by the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, the backlash against them grew.

Films can be pulled from screenings, and songs can be sung no more, but statues are harder to erase simply because they're big, heavy, and require approval to move. In the southern US, multiple states have laws that prohibit cities from removing Confederate statues and memorials. Georgia law states that "no publicly owned military monuments can be relocated, removed, concealed, obscured, or altered unless it is to preserve, protect, or help interpretation."[10] That includes monuments to the Confederacy. In Mississippi, streets named after Confederate leaders cannot be renamed. Monument removal requires a state legislature vote in South Carolina and the approval of a historical oversight commission in Tennessee.[11] Although conservatives detest big government controls on what local communities can do, it seems the sentiment doesn't apply to issues of monument removal and street re-naming. Most of these laws went into effect in the early 2000s, when some Southern states were urged to remove Confederate flags from statehouses. If the states had to get rid of their Confederate flags, they were going to ensure the monuments remained.

Like Confederate monuments, the Confederate flag is not a direct remnant from the Civil War. In fact, the flag rarely flew between the end of the war and the 1950s, when it experienced a revival in the wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. In 1955, the Association of County Commissioners in Georgia began pushing for a redesign of the state flag to include the Confederate battle flag. The ACC's intentions were clear: de-segregation was "an affront and challenge to the traditions of our people… [and] this Association and its members… pledge to the Governor and all public officials of the State, full support in each and every way or means required… to protect and maintain the segregation of the races in our schools." Seeing *Brown v. Board* as an example of gross government overreach, Georgia commissioners and other states began appropriating Confederate symbols in the name of preserving heritage.[12]

There are over 1,700 public Confederate icons in the US.[13] The vast majority of the Confederate monuments standing today were built during the height of Jim Crow in the early 1900s and the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s. These were times of intense prejudice and violence against African Americans, and the monuments were erected in order to make public the twisted ideology of white supremacy. Most of the decisions to build them were made unilaterally, without public consent, and with a healthy dose of Lost Cause nostalgia.[14] They were erected to coerce nostalgia for a dark chapter in American history, and they have become part of a heated debate about how — and what — we choose to remember.

Monumental Forces

In the 2010s, cries to tear down the Confederate monuments across the US grew louder, triggering a wave of backlash and removals. Opponents have argued that Confederate monuments are racist tributes honoring a failed treasonous state that refused to recognize Black lives as anything but

chattel. Supporters believe the monuments are historical and that removing them will erase our history, no matter how bloody it is. Some opponents have suggested replacing the monuments with statues of important Civil Rights leaders, while supporters grease the slippery slope, speculating that if Confederate memorials are toppled, then monuments to the Founding Fathers will be next. A small ambivalent minority begs the question: do monuments even matter? The answer is, of course they do. Monuments are not just chunks of marble or bronze molded into shapes. They are imbued with meaning, not only because they symbolize things, but also because they are symbolically rich and, depending on their composition, materially sturdy.

Public memory scholar Thomas Dunn has outlined four defining characteristics of all monuments: "durability, an epideictic impulse, expansion, and power."[15] He writes that monuments are durable because they "[outlast] the flesh" and "offer [their] subjects the capacity to become immortal."[16] Made from marble, stone, bronze, or some other sturdy material, they must be able to weather the elements and last. Monuments are also epideictic, as Aristotle defines it, meaning they must remind us of the past and point us to the future. Often referencing grand historical moments — battles, triumphs, defeats, and so forth — monuments "[reside] in the sublime."[17] They also invoke awe, exhibit a widescreen presence, and expand outwards into society. "[A] monument that does not spread its message to others so that it might be replicated, matched, or exceeded is likely a failed monument," Dunn writes.[18] Essentially, monuments need to be heuristic; they must inspire future monuments. And finally, monuments are powerful.[19] Though they may exist for public consumption, they are typically associated with those in power, "not the peasants."[20] Because of this, they wield enormous influence in forming thoughts and ideologies.

Insofar as they persist through time, and show their wear and tear, monuments appeal to our interest in ruins, weathering, and patina. They

make visible the passage of time. For many, monuments represent history itself, the past materialized in the present for everyone to witness. Unless someone augments, supplements, or queers monuments with graffiti, adornments, photos, or other materials, most are taken “dead seriously” by their supporters.[21]

But the function of a monument isn’t necessarily to preserve history but to fix memory. Because Confederate monuments, in particular, were built in reaction to the white fear of Blacks after emancipation, they are really more like invented traditions that simplify the past as “heritage,” founded on nothing more than prejudice.[22] The ones who oversaw their construction were arrested by a form of reactionary nostalgia; they felt that by building everlasting monuments they might restore what had been lost after the Civil War. Supporters of Confederate monuments today see them as historical realities “fixed for the sake of preservation” — the actual past residing in the present.[23] This is why supporters recoil at the thought of their removal, for they see that as an erasure of the past. But what they don’t realize is that they’ve been duped by nostalgia.

In the summer of 2020, the statue of slave trader Edward Colston was toppled in Bristol and replaced with one of Jen Reid, an activist who marched in support of the Movement for Black Lives. Years of police brutality against Black lives, including a particularly horrendous public execution of George Floyd in May 2020, triggered a worldwide protest against the police as a violent organization and a channel for white supremacy. In cities across the world, police have killed largely with impunity, under the ever-watchful gaze of statues depicting some of history’s most brutal racists, bigots, and imperialists. A day after the Reid statue went up, it was taken down by Bristol authorities because, as the mayor of Bristol wrote, it was placed on Colston’s former plinth without permission. Like the legal mechanisms that prevent the removal of

Confederate monuments, Bristol's law dictates the city's monuments and fixes nostalgia in its very legal codes.[24]

Southern appeals to heritage paper over the horrors of chattel slavery and Jim Crow, mainly because they are founded upon what James Baldwin calls a "weird nostalgia." Southern whites obsessed with the Lost Cause are blinded by their nostalgia for a "vanished state of security and order" that they believe they fought to the death to preserve.[25] According to philosopher Christian Ravela, nostalgic whites see their own death as the ultimate crime against humanity, the final sin that "crystalizes the suffering in the fallen world, the sign that the order of things is off kilter."[26] The grand historical "drama of fallenness and redemption" stars dying whites who have fallen from their privileged position.[27] African Americans in this weird nostalgic drama are bit players, but their suffering takes "center stage."[28] "The tragedy of white men is how the system corrupted them," Ravela writes. "The tragedy for… African American[s]… is that there is no place to fall and no place to rise. It is just their lot in life."[29] Black death, on the contrary, serves as either pleasure for the racist or pity for the white savior, who wishes to liberate Blacks. Certainly, poor whites have suffered in ways wealthier whites have not, but they have always been white. It is this exclusive yearning for the Lost Cause, paid for by the blood of white Confederate soldiers, that animates the weird nostalgia for monuments commemorating men who refused to acknowledge the humanity of Blacks.

The weird nostalgia of white Americans is also marked by suffering. The more that Confederate monument supporters mourn the Lost Cause, the more that they suffer. This suffering eventually leads to fear, stoked especially by political leaders who benefit from a fearful white populace. If reactionary leaders can get nostalgic whites to believe that at any moment they will be overtaken by a radical militia of people who don't look like them, then they can justify austerity and military measures that continue to disenfranchise everyone but the elite.[30]

During the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, Donald Trump signed the Executive Order on Protecting American Monuments, Memorials, and Statues and Combating Recent Criminal Violence.[31] The order accused protestors of wanting to overthrow the US government, referring to them as "rioters, arsonists… [a]narchists and left-wing extremists" who have been instigated by traveling "agitators" seeking to stoke the flames of mob violence. Cherry-picking incidents in which some groups toppled memorials honoring abolitionists and African Americans during the Civil War, the order asserts that protestors don't care which monuments are destroyed, they just want to destroy them. It then goes on to threaten "any person or any entity that destroys, damages, vandalizes, or desecrates a monument, memorial, or statue within the United States or otherwise vandalizes government property" with federal prosecution. A largely theatrical gesture, the order didn't establish any new policies since damaging government property was already a crime. Instead, it served as a rhetorical tactic to scare whites stuck at home during the COVID-19 pandemic into thinking that the long-feared race war had begun.

To many conservatives, the destruction of monuments is an attack on the homeland. Although Trump's executive order didn't establish anything new, the Department of Homeland Security thought otherwise. According to a document from the Office of Intelligence & Analysis, the DHS can now conduct surveillance on protestors and collect their data. Of utmost importance to the DHS are "[t]hreats to damage or destroy any public monument, memorial, or statue." In the eyes of the DHS, toppling *any* monument is a homeland security issue, which means the same tactics and force employed by the DHS will be used to target anyone who threatens the nation's memorials. Even an act as harmless as spraying graffiti can be considered a threat.[32]

The DHS document reinforced the increasingly popular opinion among conservative elites that law and order must quell any kind of dissent, but it

also established another kind of precedent. The protection of monuments, memorials, and statues is a mission to preserve nostalgia for the homeland, and that nostalgia is now being forcefully policed. In the eyes of reactionaries, if you are not willfully nostalgic for the America that is slowly being threatened by Black Lives Matter, Marxism and its invented bogeyman variations, feminists, or liberals of any kind, then you will be punished. The normal, healthy act of protest in democracies is now considered dangerous, and the police will be sent to the streets to demand order by physical force, like they did in Portland in July 2020, when unmarked vehicles carrying DHS agents detained and disappeared Black Lives Matter protestors, or when the NYPD held hundreds of protestors in detention for days that same month.[33] And similar measures are being proposed in the UK. A response to the toppling of the Colston statue in Bristol in 2020, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill is a proposed piece of legislation criminalizing peaceful protest. The bill allows for protesters to be prosecuted for damaging public monuments and sentenced to up to ten years in prison. After protests against the bill were met with brutal police violence in March 2021, it has been delayed, for now.[34] These are state reactions against dissent, but they are also coercive methods to enforce the right kind of patriotic nostalgia.

Set in Stone

From the beginning, white reactionaries have weaponized nostalgia against Blacks to advance certain interests. Aboard ships in the Middle Passage, slaves were incapable of experiencing nostalgia. Then, whilst struggling against systemic racism in the era of Jim Crow, Blacks were too nostalgic. Today, they are not nostalgic for the right things. Whenever the dominant culture wishes to justify racist subjugation, it merely changes the nostalgic narrative.

Monuments, memorials, and statues are obviously nostalgic. They are meant to elicit certain commemorative feelings associated with the emotion as we understand it today. We can reflect on the passage of time in their presence and marvel at how things have changed for better or worse. We can pay tribute to lives lost while feeling the weight of history press against us. We can acknowledge that history is most easily read as a series of major events affecting numerous people, and a monument keeps those events preserved in stone, bronze, or marble for the future. They remind us that people came before us, and we will eventually go too, because nothing is forever.

But monuments give us proof that maybe that's not true, for they also exhibit a quality unattainable by humans: *monuments last*. They show us how fleeting our time is here on Earth, how there is only a few years to fight and do right, and then you're gone. They remind us that history is a long time, but also no time at all.

There is a double nostalgia at work with Confederate monuments. The first is elicited by the monument itself, representing a Lost Cause or the Confederacy or the South "as it was." This nostalgia portrays the past as harboring some understood ideal long lost to the march of progress. Some nostalgic sufferers wish to restore that ideal. Theirs is more than mere mourning. It is the deep, painful acknowledgement that we have strayed far from pure origins and that there are people to blame for it. To them, the monument signals that something crucial has disappeared but that maybe, if we can get back there to recover it, things will be made right again. Staring up at the slave trader on horseback, or the "Silent Sentinel" at parade rest, or the president of a treasonous state, or the flag that flew over it, the bitter nostalgic might regard those dark chapters of history as the ones to return to. The second nostalgia is for the time period the monument was erected. Old monuments are weathered. Their aesthetics are of an older time. Their inscriptions are sometimes written in dated language. And so, in the

presence of a Confederate monument, an onlooker may not only be nostalgic for the antebellum period, hoping the South will rise again, but also for the era of Jim Crow, when many of the monuments standing today were built.

And yet, the double nostalgia of these monuments is erected on a shaky foundation. It is important to note that many of the Confederate soldier monuments towering over town squares across the South were mass produced after the war in Northern factories. They were thrown together with zinc, not marble, because marble statues were more expensive and time-consuming to create. The rush to fix the emotional tenor of the postbellum period meant that the South couldn't afford to wait to pay for finely crafted statues, and so it had to rely on companies above the Mason-Dixon Line to crank out shoddy commemorations that weren't even of Southern origin. And the process to make them was anything but sublime, as art historian Lola Arellano-Fryer notes. "The zinc casting process consisted of casting the figure in parts, which were then soldered together," she explains. "A faux finish was applied to the figure in order to mask these soldering joints, and make the material look more expensive. This allowed for segments of the figures to be easily reused, with the ironic result that the figures representing both Northern and Southern soldiers were largely made of the same elements."[35] As a result, many of the Confederate monuments around today are poorly made, loosely anchored, and, thus, easy to tear down. They are the monumental versions of nostalgia-scapes, icons that seem to convey the "real" past but are actually flimsy simulacra designed to soothe anxious whites. They weren't built to last, per se, but to enforce antebellum nostalgia, and to start doing so quickly after the war. Although they have withstood the test of time thus far, the "enduring" past these statues are supposed to commemorate in their own durability is just another nostalgic illusion.

Whether it’s made of zinc or marble, a monument commemorating racism and imperialism has no place in a public square, because it doesn’t symbolize history. You don’t visit monuments to learn about the past. In fact, we don’t even visit them like we visit a museum, which is a place we tour and then leave behind. Instead, we live and work in the shadows of monuments. We orient around them. That’s partially due to where monuments are erected: in town squares and places of public gatherings. We exist in relation to them, and they influence our thoughts and actions.

“Nostalgia in and of itself is not a bad thing,” writes Tara McPherson, “for it can function as a wedge to introduce a critical distance into cultural practices and cultural theory.”[36] This is important to remember, even as Badia Ahad-Legardy points out that “the privilege of historical nostalgia is more readily available to white people.”[37] But assuming that Black folks can’t enjoy the pleasures of nostalgia is “a dangerous concession” that “reproduces the narrative that black affect is limited to the traumatic.”[38] It is, in fact, trauma that is so often on display in Confederate monuments, that “privilege[es] black misery” and also white historical nostalgia.[39] Erecting monuments to progressive leaders and people’s victories is certainly an act of nostalgia, but not the kind that memorializes racial segregation. Progressive monuments honor the past losses while fueling future fights against imperial machinery and intolerant ideologies. They tell stories of the struggles that produced change and the ones that died trying. We celebrate the former and yearn for the latter. And it’s all right to yearn, as long as the nostalgic ache is for the resistance, not the oppressors — the people, not the power. We shouldn’t repudiate the dark systems of the past, but we don’t necessarily need to memorialize them in public squares either.

Toppling reactionary monuments is dangerous only if you think monuments convey history. Supporters of Confederate monuments believe this, but they are wrong. Tearing down racist monuments doesn’t erase history, and it doesn’t wipe our memories. It merely rids the public arena of

commemorations of violence. We don’t commemorate every event or person we learn about in history class. Some historical facts are merely studied. Not everything must be monumentalized to be remembered. We can still learn the names of the oppressors, we just shouldn’t have to live beneath their fixed, stone gaze.

Part II
The Present in the Past

Mels drive-in

Chapter 5
The Nostalgia Industry

“Contrary to popular opinion,” Stephanie Coontz wrote in *The Way We Never Were*, “*Leave It to Beaver* was not a documentary.”[1] A sitcom about the Cleaver family and their rascally son, Theodore “the Beaver” Cleaver, *Leave It to Beaver* is less of a documentary and more of an exhibit. It reflects the social relations of certain groups — namely, white, middle-class families — and shows us today the kinds of popular culture they consumed in the late 1950s. Of course, *Leave It to Beaver* doesn’t represent the full breadth of experiences in the 1950s, and it certainly doesn’t give a voice to those who were relegated to the margins. But it does reveal the dreams and projections of the dominant culture of the period. It tells us what some people back then wanted to watch in their leisure time and which ideas were exchanged between viewers and the screen.

Because we can’t return to the 1950s, we have to settle for the next best thing: consuming sitcoms, films, music, and other forms of recorded media from that iconic decade. They serve as windows into older times, allowing us to see people who really lived, wearing clothes that were once popular, sporting hairstyles that were all the rage, talking on the only telephones that were around, and driving the latest cars of the time. Experiencing these old media in the present is enough of a fantastic shock to make some believe they’re consuming real history, that they’re actually watching a documentary. But the people in old sitcoms and movies are acting; they’re reading scripts, playing parts, feigning emotions. Obviously, many viewers

are aware of this. They don’t watch hokey sitcoms and Hollywood films simply to learn about history. They watch to feel the dizzying euphoria of what it would be like to live in a simplistic sitcom universe, to experience the “vertigo of a world without flaws”, as Jean Baudrillard called it.[2]

The culture industry has always relied on nostalgia to sell entertainment, as music critic Simon Reynolds pointed out in his classic study of pop nostalgia, *Retromania*.[3] Since the 1950s, however, pop culture’s addiction to its own past grew more pathological, primarily because the culture industry figured out it could make a quick buck by selling nostalgia for its own creations. By the second half of the twentieth century, production studios were rebooting old favorites, sequels and prequels were greenlit, and the past was strip-mined and restored for yearning eyes. The result was the birth of the nostalgia industry, the collection of media companies, production houses, artists, and content creators commodifying our collective ache not just for the past, but for flawless worlds. Real life, with its messy scandals, boredom, and stress, will always pale in comparison to what the nostalgia industry can cook up. But the nostalgia industry isn’t just in the business of selling the past. It also circulates versions of history that support dominant present-day ideologies.

It should come as no surprise that the nostalgia industry booms during fearful times by revising the past to fit present needs. Nearly any part of the past, from the landmarks to the hinterlands, is fair game for a nostalgic facelift. Even the elements of the past that were once deemed radical and dangerous can be de-fanged and sold by the nostalgia industry as family-friendly fare. It’s a process whereby the nostalgia industry can turn any decade of nightmares into the “good old days.” Take the 1994 drama epic *Forrest Gump*, which basically neutralizes the entire second half of the twentieth century, subsuming every historical moment, tiny or tumultuous, beneath a simplistic ideology of individual responsibility: Forrest Gump is a rational actor, the center of the universe, and everything is in service to him

and his destiny. The film is proof that nostalgia can be weaponized to reinforce dominant, whitewashed histories merely by revising whole chunks of the past. And it invites audiences to take part in helping to keep history clean. Nostalgic viewers can join Forrest Gump, who starts in the past and travels back to the future, in going behind the angel of history and tidying up the piling wreckage.

Consuming nostalgic media can be very enjoyable, but the nostalgia industry produces more than just entertainment. It also teaches lessons. It emphasizes conservative ideas about our own history and often erases the more uncomfortable ones, all in the name of turning a profit. In fact, it is by the logic of the profit motive, not some failure to come up with new ideas, that pop culture today has fallen under the spell of nostalgia.

Back to the Fifties

The official record tells us that the postwar society of the 1950s was a time of unfettered promise fueled by the elation of decisive victory. The reality was much different, as many white, middle-class adults saw phantoms lurking in all the shadows. There was the fear of juvenile delinquency, constructed in part by teen movies, which reflected the rhetoric of delinquency innervating the culture at that time. The fear of communism gripped the US, and there were whispers that red sympathizers could be infiltrating the country, working undercover to infect everyone with their ideology. Many whites feared the overturning of “separate but equal” law, which kept Blacks marginalized. Men returning from combat struggled to re-fix the gender roles that had been switched when women entered the workforce during the war. Many felt emasculated as they tried to transition from a military to a corporate middle-class lifestyle; some were haunted in particular by the Kinsey Reports, which “[revealed] the surprising number of American men who had had homosexual encounters.”[4] In a quest to quiet

the moral panic, postwar American society grew obsessed with eradicating deviance and delinquency. It would be a few more years before the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the rise of the anti-war movement, but panic was erupting across the country as soon as the troops returned home from the war. Mirroring the fear of a possible societal breakdown by invisible forces, and with a massive postwar surplus, the culture industry created some of its most potent and long-lasting symbols.

The 1950s gave us “the Fifties,” a stylistic trend associated not with the decade’s moral panics but with its pop culture. A film or a song doesn’t have to explicitly reference the 1950s for it to be nostalgic for the Fifties, as media critic Michael Dwyer has written. The Fifties can be “signaled through costume, hair, props, and décor” which, when taken together, communicate a “prosperous, peaceful, and optimistic period in American history after World War II but before the Kennedy assassination.”[5] One can represent “Fifties-ness” by coiffing one’s hair or investing in mid-century modern furniture. It doesn’t matter what year it is: if you put enough Fifties icons together, you can conjure up the decade itself.

George Lucas’ film *American Graffiti* helped to establish many of the Fifties tropes we recognize today: hot rods, sock hops, carhops, and greasers. Released in 1973, the film takes place over a single night, as a group of California teens in 1962 ride the strip one last time, before some move to college and others stay behind. Although it’s not set in the 1950s, it *is* set in the Fifties. Lucas stuffs the film with iconic Fifties fashion and style, which likely made the early 1960s seem like ancient history to viewers of the time. The result was bittersweet. Looking back at the salad days of soda shops and poodle skirts, audiences of 1973 couldn’t easily ignore the decade of protest, prolonged war, and assassinations that came between. But Lucas’ choice to set the film in 1962 was no accident. He was eighteen years old that year, and much of the film draws on his experience as a teenager in California. 1962 was also the year before John F. Kennedy

was assassinated. It was the year before Martin Luther King Jr. marched on Washington, DC, and delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech. It was the year before the long 1950s, and the innocence associated with it, finally ended.

We experience much of *American Graffiti* through the eyes of Curt, played by Richard Dreyfuss, as he and his friends cruise Modesto in search of love, life’s answers, or just a good time. It is the night before he heads off to college, but Curt is having reservations about leaving his hometown. His friend Steve is excited to leave, but Steve’s younger girlfriend, Laurie, doesn’t want him to go. The night unfolds with the cast of characters seeking guidance, resisting the creeping nostalgia that Curt knows they will certainly feel once they leave Modesto behind.

While cruising the strip, Curt notices a young woman in a Thunderbird. He immediately falls for her, and the rest of the night, as he works through the tension between leaving and staying, he searches for her — perhaps knowing that upon meeting, he will have also found his justification for staying. Desperate to make contact with the young woman, Curt convinces a popular disc jockey to read a message on air instructing her to call the payphone outside a local carhop, and he waits all night for the call, eventually falling asleep. In the early hours of morning, he’s awakened abruptly to the sound of ringing. She’s phoned him at last. Overcome with the mania of nostalgia, Curt asks to meet her someplace. She suggests they may cross paths cruising the strip that night, but this is no good. He is set to leave for college that day. Deep down Curt knows that if he stays, he’ll go night after night chasing her. After all, romantic nostalgics like Curt never obtain their objects of desire, so the yearning doesn’t ever stop. He instead must learn to live with her forever out of reach, always back there, and if he tries too hard to connect with her, he will be destroyed.[6] Unable to fully reach her, Curt is free to make an emotional, but no less legitimate, judgment. In the end, he decides to leave.

George Lucas himself would suffer a different fate, eventually falling victim to his nostalgia. With his 1977 blockbuster *Star Wars*, Lucas relied on the magic of filmmaking to pursue his object of nostalgic desire: his youth. He never got to it. But he came closer than just about anyone else and amassed billions of dollars trying. He would go on to keep trying, editing and re-editing *Star Wars* to the chagrin of fans nostalgic for the original series. As advances in visual effects dovetailed with the rise of blockbuster budgets, Lucas did everything he could to relive his youth.

Like *American Graffiti*, *Star Wars* is an example of what Fredric Jameson calls a "nostalgia film," a movie that uses cultural artifacts from older time periods to induce in viewers a major dose of nostalgia.[7] Nostalgia films are so successful because one doesn't have to live through a time period to be nostalgic for it. When people are nostalgic for the 1980s, they may not actually yearn for the 1980s. They may be nostalgic for the way 1980s films look, or how music from the 1980s sounds, or how characters in 1980s media behave and communicate. In other words, they may be nostalgic for specific formal aspects of older media that have disappeared with time.[8] They could even feel nostalgic watching a movie made in the present day and *set* in the 1980s. Or set in a different time period that *looks* like the 1980s. Nostalgia is oriented as much to form, aesthetics, and behavior as it is to time and space.

At first glance, it may not seem like *Star Wars* is a nostalgia film. After all, it's set in a universe of laser guns, robots, and planet-destroying weaponry. But nostalgia films can be set anywhere, because their nostalgia seeps out of their aesthetics, not necessarily the historical periods they reference. This is what makes the nostalgia industry so lucrative. Even if a film takes place in a galaxy far, far away, it can induce nostalgia by drawing on older aesthetics. And for *Star Wars*, those aesthetics came straight from Lucas' favorite childhood media: *Flash Gordon* serials, Hollywood Westerns, and *Buck Rogers*.

Years before making *Star Wars*, Lucas was searching for his object of nostalgia likely because he knew finding it via a mass medium like film would make him wealthy beyond his dreams. But he also believed that generating optimism would correct the strain of pessimism he saw circulating in culture at the time. In an interview after the release of *American Graffiti*, he admitted:

> [I]t's hard to be optimistic when everything tells you to be pessimistic and cynical. I'm a very bad cynic. But we've got to regenerate optimism. Maybe kids will walk out of [*American Graffiti*] and for a second they'll feel, "We could really make something out of this country, or we could really make something out of our lives." It's all that hokey stuff about being a good neighbor, and the American spirit and all that crap. There is something in it.[9]

What perhaps started as a legitimate concern evolved into a targeted effort to mobilize optimism at any cost. To do this, Lucas dedicated his career to rewriting his own past as a feel-good, nostalgic fantasy and representing it on screens everywhere. He was instrumental in building the nostalgia industry, and the *Star Wars* franchise has functioned for decades as a vehicle for nostalgia: hop in the Millennium Falcon, and you too might be able to touch the object of nostalgia with your fingertips. You can be a kid again, if only for a few hours, with the help of advanced visual effects and simple narratives.

Although it's a nostalgia film that probes the emotion with a critical awareness, *American Graffiti* marginalizes all other 1950s experiences, except those of white, straight men, as Pauline Kael wrote.[10] Future nostalgia films would largely pick up on the conservative aspects of *American Graffiti*, choosing to leave behind the film's ambiguous treatment of nostalgia. It would only take about five years for the nostalgia industry to

start cranking out *American Graffiti* copycats, the most famous of which was *Grease*.

Released in 1978, *Grease* has none of the seriousness of *American Graffiti*, but it also has none of its critical perspective on nostalgia. The story of a greaser bad boy who falls in love with a straight-edge transfer student, the film is a silly, uncritical parody, as Vera Dika writes.[11] It is merely "a fantasy of how we may wish life could have been in the past, but most importantly, how we wish it could be in the present."[12] There are the usual Fifties tropes: the teen love, the angst, the drag race where no one dies (unlike a similar scene in *Rebel Without a Cause*, the 1955 teen film to which so many Fifties retreads are indebted). By essentially erasing Blacks from its filmworld and "eradicat[ing] the more threatening aspects of race, gender, and class raised by recent 1960s progressive movements," *Grease* assuaged white fear in the late 1970s, and continues to do so today.[13]

By the turn of the 1980s, everyone was looking backwards. Bob Seger yearned for Main Street, late nights in parked pickups, and "Old Time Rock and Roll." In 1982, Paul Davis sang about high school love in "'65 Love Affair," a song that was more *Grease* than counterculture, but Davis chose 1965 to appeal to listeners who came of age in the 1960s. In 1984, Bryan Adams reminisced on the "Summer of '69" even though his lyrics referenced obvious Fifties hallmarks. The 1960s, with its civil rights and anti-war movements, was being revised. The past became one long night at the drive-in.

When it comes to the nostalgia industry, all roads lead back to the 1950s. The pop aesthetics of the Fifties were repackaged throughout the twentieth century, and the trend continues to this day. Whenever the nostalgia industry wants to represent youth and naïveté, it merely has to inject the symbols of the Fifties into its creations. Desperate to feel the warm breeze of youth again, many will bet their bottom dollar for the experience.

The Nostalgic Gaze

Certain actors, and the characters they portray, are nostalgia industry regulars. They often get their big breaks starring as young people in major films, but many of them never move on from those youthful roles. This includes actors like Ron Howard (who stars in *American Graffiti*), Michael J. Fox, the Brat Pack, and Finn Wolfhard. You can watch them exist forever as young people in the past, in simplistic sitcoms and movies like *Happy Days*, *Back to the Future*, *Pretty in Pink*, and *Stranger Things*. They are awkward innocence personified, the middle-class rambunctious icons of getting into good, clean trouble on Friday nights, perhaps stumbling upon a massive conspiracy that involves the whole town, which they might end up saving. They don't pose a real danger to adults, even though they might mess things up regularly. They can get away with whatever they want, and they'll likely live to enjoy some praise. Viewers watch them with enjoyment so they too can relive their youthful days with all the excitement and none of the real danger, boredom, or constraints of being young.

James Dean, perhaps the ultimate symbol of youth, is also a nostalgia industry regular, thanks to his sudden death in 1955 at the age of twenty-four. Dean wrecked his Porsche Spyder on US Route 466 while traveling to a car race in Salinas, California, and was pronounced dead at the Paso Robles War Memorial Hospital, his head nearly decapitated.[14] He only appeared in three major motion pictures — two of which were released posthumously — and lived to experience less than six months of his stardom, which is startling considering the influence he has had on the entire world. Since his death, he's been made into a spectacle, a popular item in the nostalgia industry that helps to sell capitalist notions of freedom by commodifying his fiery vigor and untimely death. Clothing brands, car manufacturers, and luxury goods companies have all sold their wares with Dean's likeness.

Because James Dean cannot star in any more films, the nostalgia industry has had to cobble together imitations instead. Postwar pop culture is filled with images of the "Deanager" trope, or the rough, moody male character based on Dean's persona.[15] In real life and in the characters he portrayed onscreen, James Dean was complicated, ambiguous, and not nearly as cool as the Deanagers modeled after him. Unlike the Ren McCormack character played by Kevin Bacon in 1984's *Footloose*, "the characters [Dean] played in Fifties family melodramas were tortured, emotionally vulnerable, and desperate for parental approval."[16] Ren, on the other hand, is silent and hard. He is Dean without the tears and tenderness — and much less interesting by comparison. But an emotionally complex Deanager might threaten to remind audiences that Dean actually died, that no matter how many times his image is reprinted across media, we will never see him again. Very often, the Deanager's purpose is to soothe those anxieties, to conjure the fantasy that masculinity will prevail and save us all from sudden death, that we are in control as long as we man up.[17]

Whether it's the squeaky-clean immaturity of Marty McFly, or the anguished melodrama of James Dean, viewers find pleasure in watching these nostalgia industry regulars perform their youth on the screen. To watch them is to adopt a nostalgic gaze, which is the act of objectifying the past to serve present needs. At the receiving end of the nostalgic gaze, the past becomes the present's plaything, an object easily commodified and traded in the cultural marketplace, and an innocent vista for present-shocked eyes. But the nostalgic gaze is also the gaze of death, because it affords us the perspective of hindsight. We know something that the characters behind the screen don't, namely, what is coming to them: their faces age, they lose their beauty, they suffer unexpected tragedies. We can almost see the aura of death around them. They appear doomed, always and already dead, too pure or innocent like Natalie Wood, or too restless like James Dean, cursed to either grow old or die young — our two wretched

options. They seem too excessive to last, but one thing we know for sure: whatever they have too much of, be it purity or rebellion, we want some of it.

We also watch with a kind of cursed knowledge of the future. We know about national tragedies, new technologies, and economic downturns that the characters on the screen haven't yet experienced (or may never experience). Media critic Alex Bevan points out that nostalgic shows like *Mad Men* often "cultivate a nostalgic anticipation surrounding how the series will integrate important historical events," such as the Kennedy assassination, "that the audience and the show itself know must happen."[18] We often keep watching these shows in nostalgic anticipation to see "iconic historical media events" play out onscreen. The anticipation can deliver a nostalgic rush, but so can the outright erasure of history. Many enjoy watching *The Andy Griffith Show* simply because it refuses to engage with the issues of its time, like the Vietnam War or the civil rights movement. We know nothing really bad will ever befall the small town of Mayberry, a fact that has contributed to the show's success. Others might be fond of series that precede major historical events, like *Seinfeld*, which concluded before 9/11, or *Friends*, which takes place before smartphones and social media. The characters in these stories are frozen in time. They'll never know the future.

Nostalgia shows up not only when we compare the present to the past, but when we compare our present reality with representations of reality. It's not only an emotion that's oriented backwards but also *inwards*: into the world of representations, of which sitcoms are often the simplest. Gazing into the world of a sitcom like *Leave It to Beaver*, *Happy Days*, or *Modern Family*, we yearn for the amnesia of the characters, for that unknowing, pre-nostalgic state of being. We aren't only nostalgic for the time periods in which these sitcoms are set, but also for the ordered world of the sitcom, the sense of determinism, the feeling that nothing really is at stake and all

threats are relatively manageable. Nothing is uncertain in a sitcom, and everything follows a script. Even the sets are nostalgic; they might look familiar because they're often recycled from series to series.[19] Living in a sitcom would grant viewers their ultimate wish: to unknow the future.

However, a tension arises quite frequently when we yearn for the pastness of older sitcoms. Many of them are off-color, offensive, retrograde, or downright intolerant, featuring mostly (if not only) white characters. They reflect popular attitudes of previous time periods, many of which were racist, homophobic, transphobic, misogynist, ableist, and ageist. Although some people can consume old sitcoms like *The Honeymooners* and *The Dukes of Hazzard* without cringing, others simply cannot look past the verbal abuse and Confederate flags. And, as Alex Bevan notes, the nostalgic "homages to the sitcom suburb" today aren't much better; they often "recycle whitewashed histories of postwar America and effectively write people of color out of national memory."[20] In order to relieve this tension, some retro sendups and reboots attempt to reverse this whitewashing by writing in characters who aren't white and normative, but this can come off as tokenistic.[21] Bevan observes that quality nostalgic television is often "painfully aware of the histories" that postwar television "elide[d] or erase[d] from national memory." She notes that *Mad Men*, in particular, "gestures toward inclusivity or recovering these histories, albeit clumsily and noncommittally," a gesture that "reflects what it anticipates dominant audiences can tolerate at this historical moment."[22] To entitled fans, writing inclusivity into their beloved franchises can come off as an affront to their nostalgia. When a remake of the original *Ghostbusters* film from 1984 was announced in 2016, angry fans flocked to YouTube and social media to denigrate the decision to cast women in the lead roles. The film foregrounded a central problem with rebooting: how do artists capitalize on nostalgia for bygone pop culture while also attending to the norms of contemporary politics?

Long before major production companies started featuring underrepresented minorities in lead roles, viewers who did not see people like them represented on screens had to make do in other ways. In her article “Remembering Mayberry in White and Black,” memory studies scholar Kathleen McElroy writes about African American viewers who enjoy watching *The Andy Griffith Show* even though only one episode in the entire series features a Black actor with a speaking part (“a Chopin-playing football coach in Season 7,” McElroy notes). She cites several Black writers who watch the series because it reflects their own experiences living in the rural South. They aren’t alienated by the paucity of Black cast members, but, rather, sometimes conjure “extra-memories,” as McElroy calls them, to “complement… Mayberry’s narrative” and account for Black erasure.[23]

Audiences underrepresented onscreen might have to resort to creating extra-memories to consume nostalgic pop culture that is otherwise permanently white, straight, and suburban. And, in fact, it is that permanence that is so enticing to many.[24] Each time we return to a favorite movie or TV show, or hear a beloved old song on the radio, we know the characters never change and the song remains the same. This can be irksome at times, because some of us know that real life isn’t as unchanging and perfect as a sitcom. You might desire to jump into the world of a sitcom and tear it all down, exposing its phony façade. But this sense of permanence is a comforting source of nostalgia for many. The narrative arcs of soap operas and other melodramas sometimes stretch for years, decades even, without much changing or any of the characters learning lessons. If an actor dies, their character is simply recast. Holiday movies produced by Lifetime and the Hallmark Channel follow a rigidly nostalgic formula: a protagonist living in the Big City often returns to her quaint hometown, or she chooses a new home far away from the hustle and bustle of metropolis. They are so changeless as to be nearly indistinguishable from each other.

But none of that really matters, because each time we start binge-watching *Friends* from season one, we know that nothing will be different. Even though George Lucas reveals to us at the film's end that the characters in *American Graffiti* will either grow old, die, or go missing, they are really still alive: waiting in the film, forever young in the Fifties.

For many, permanent youth is the object of their nostalgic gaze — hence why so many stories told by the nostalgia industry take place at school. High school, in particular, is an emotionally rich setting for a nostalgic film or series because many adult and adolescent audiences long for the relative simplicity and routine of school. There are films in which the protagonist returns to school as an adult, like *Peggy Sue Got Married*, *Never Been Kissed*, and *Billy Madison*, as well as the television series *21 Jump Street* and its film adaptations. These stories reflect the desire to experience youth over again as an adult. Then there are the films and series where only we the viewers return. These are school stories, sometimes set in a simplified version of the present, but very often set in the past: *The Breakfast Club*, *PEN15*, *Saved by the Bell*, *Dazed and Confused*, *Freaks and Geeks*, and *High School Musical*. In these narratives, the neoliberal assault on education hasn't occurred. Hallways aren't policed by armed officers, and a student's fate isn't decided in a data room. There are no mass shootings, biometric locks, or behavior-controlling apps. In these fantasies, the only worry is whether your peers will accept you, not whether you're being watched by closed-circuit cameras. These schools, of course, are only representations. They never existed. But they symbolize a burning desire among many to drop out of the present and enroll in the past.[25]

One of the more popular school stories is the *Harry Potter* franchise. The school Harry attends, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, is nothing like the data-focused, technocratic schools of the West. There is no digital technology present at Hogwarts, no laptops or Google Classroom, but there is plenty of magic, which serves the purpose of technology

without anyone having to use technology. (In fact, if a computer comes near the campus of Hogwarts, it short-circuits, as most witches and wizards find them unnecessary or inferior to magic.[26]) Harry and his peers stress over exams and grades like any normal student, but that's nothing compared to the stress of facing Voldemort. And many of the lessons learned in Hogwarts classes can be applied outside the classroom. A spell studied in Defense Against the Dark Arts might be cast on the Dark Lord himself. In the real world, students cycle through classes that seem to have no direct bearing on their lives at all. Hogwarts gives them — and the adults they become — a glimpse into an idealistic school experience. Many have escaped the grind of school and work by gazing into the orderly universe of *Harry Potter*, where the threats might be scary, but everything is in service to the protagonist and no one knows the future.

We'll always have a fond yearning for the "lost dances [and] lost chances" of youth.[27] But as schools increasingly become sites of corporate penetration, our nostalgia won't be for school as we remember it, but for what school could be: a public good, where critical thinking is cultivated and prioritized, and where young people can learn to experiment with themselves without being reduced to numbers.

To be forever young is to believe that, as Vladimir Nabokov wrote, "[e]verything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die."[28] This is the kind of permanence the nostalgia industry sells. Perhaps it won't be time travel that heals the suffering of nostalgia, but rather the ability to download our erased minds into a sitcom.

Tightening Constraints

Nostalgia provides, in many cases, an escape from the drudgery and pain of life. And although it isn't always the best strategy, escape, as I'll discuss later on, can serve a crucial purpose. Laughing at a comedy or taking a ride

in the Millennium Falcon can be an enjoyable experience. People simply like consuming nostalgia, and the nostalgia industry is there to offer it to them. This doesn't mean that the nostalgia industry is a hypodermic needle that injects nostalgia into viewers. Audiences aren't powerless against it; they have the power to draw their own conclusions while watching a classic film or listening to a hit single from the 1980s.[29] Assuming that we're all blank slates on which the nostalgia industry can write its propaganda ignores our interpretive power. And movies, pop songs, and artistic texts of all kinds are polysemous: they can elicit different interpretations in different people. Some viewers watching *Star Wars* might interpret the film in the way George Lucas intended. Others might identify different themes.

Take James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*. Numerous people regard Dean's character, Jim Stark, as the peak of unbridled masculinity. But others read him differently, oftentimes creating their own extra-memories to do so. Queer activist Marie Cartier sees Jim not as a man but as a butch woman, arguing even that Dean himself modeled his character on butch women of the time, possibly as a way for gay men to "be mainstreamed into the culture at large through a messenger like James Dean, who was believed to be a straight male."[30] Dean's persona as Jim has also served as a model of gay identity for East Asian gay men immigrating to Canada and the US.[31] "Dean [is] susceptible to multiple readings of what, and who, he was and might have been had there been no fatal car crash," film scholar Michael DeAngelis has pointed out, arguing that claiming Dean as a gay icon "provide[s] gay men and emerging gay subcultures with a means of empowering themselves."[32] At one point, writer and former friend of Dean's, William Bast, noted that attempting to construct a single understanding from all the competing interpretations of Dean would result in a "schizoid colossus."[33]

This doesn't mean that there are as many interpretations of a film as there are viewers. There is a limit to the polysemy of *Rebel Without a*

Cause. As rhetorical critic Celeste Condit puts it, “Audience members are neither simply resistive nor dupes.”[34] However, our “ability… to shape [our] own readings… is constrained by a variety of factors.”[35] Even though we can both produce and consume pop culture, there are still only so many ways we can interpret a text.

But those ways seem to be dwindling every year. Since the 1980s, the interpretive constraints have tightened, thanks largely to copyright extensions and runaway media consolidation. In 1983, nearly all American media was owned by fifty companies. Today, that number has dropped to five: AT&T, Comcast, ViacomCBS, Fox Corporation, and The Walt Disney Company. Together, they produce most of the popular culture many of us in the West consume yearly. Although all of them are worth billions, Disney stands out as an exceptionally powerful juggernaut that has had tremendous influence on public culture.

A “staunch conservative,” Walt Disney dreamed of creating his own flawless world away from the government controls he feared.[36] He believed, as Henry Giroux has documented in his book on Disney and public culture, that “corporations would solve the problems of society through their technological wizardry.”[37] So he created an entertainment colossus to ensure everyone saw things the way he did. Because Disney is now such a large company, its influence extends well beyond the screen and the perimeters of its parks. It mixes education and entertainment to “create corporate identities and to define citizens primarily as consumers and spectators.”[38] The company’s understanding of public memory is “inseparable from commercial culture,” and it has done everything in its power (which is quite strong, to say the least) to secure its position as a global ideological force.[39]

Giroux calls Disney the “nostalgia machine par excellence” because its media and theme parks “[reaffirm] a past that appeals to middle-class families, a past filled with optimism, a past that implicitly proclaims the

triumph of white culture."[40] It gentrifies public memory by selling the "fantasy of social isolation — the luxury of not having to think about, or see, human suffering."[41] And it has perfected the art of inducing nostalgia by targeting children early in life with its stories, so that when they grow into adulthood, they'll associate Disney with their own childhood. Then, the adults who grew up consuming the same stories can bond over a shared Disney nostalgia and even pass their Disney memories onto their children, continuing the cycle.

However, Disney doesn't just circulate nostalgia by erasing the messier parts of reality from its representations of the past. For decades, it has also fought to keep its characters and stories out of the public domain. By the time Mickey Mouse was created in 1928, the Copyright Act protected cultural works for up to fifty-six years, but when the mouse's protection was set to expire in the mid-1980s, Disney lobbied to change the law.[42] The expiration date was then moved to 2003, but Disney lobbied yet again in the 1990s, pushing the date to 2023. Mickey Mouse and other Disney characters have been kept out of the public domain thanks to the company's ruthless lobbying efforts, and if someone tries to use the characters without permission, Disney will dispatch its legal army to uphold the very laws the company had a hand in creating.

But Disney's copyright lobbying affects more than just the company's creations. It also sets the precedent for other media conglomerates to protect their own works from falling into the past. By extending copyright law, Disney effectively freezes mass culture. The conglomerate isn't concerned with running out of creative options, because it can just combine older, reliable elements together and induce nostalgia to sell a franchise without ever having to worry about losing the copyrights on its published works. And even if Mickey Mouse *did* lose his copyright protection, he wouldn't ever really go away. Artists both professional and amateur would appropriate the cartoon in creative ways. But limiting copyright extension

would stop Disney from controlling its own image and, subsequently, loosen the grip other media corporations have on their own works.

Cultural ideas need to grow old. They need to be sampled and remixed, reconfigured and recombined with new ideas, or perhaps forgotten altogether. But thanks to its lobbying powers, Disney ensures it has control over how its ideas are reconfigured, recombined, and remembered. Every time Disney pressures legislators to extend copyright law, it prevents the creation of new ideas, preferring instead to revive the old over and over again. In a strange twist, this process actually prevents ideas from ever getting old. Media companies like Disney can forever crib from their own past works, dressing up decaying characters to look sparkling, bowdlerizing their content to meet present-day decorum, and fixing future histories.

While Disney fights to extend its copyright, it engages in a Darwinian quest to acquire other media companies. This process, known as media consolidation, not only crushes smaller companies, it also edges out diversity — and not just diversity of voices but of ideas, as media activist Hannah Sassaman has pointed out. “When Congress passed the Telecommunications Act of 1996, it opened a floodgate for mostly locally-owned media to disappear into national conglomerates,” writes Sassaman, a move that also “reduc[ed] the number of Black, other racial minority, and women-owned print and television outlets.” As deregulatory laws continued to enable media companies to “buy each other up in local markets,” local media outlets and the communities they served disappeared. The result has not only been a “homogenized news system,” but also a homogenized culture of sameness: “a single perspective… producing the same stories on multiple channels.”[43]

This process of media homogenization produces nostalgia in two ways. First, as large media companies converge, people grow nostalgic for the local and the particular. Underrepresented communities come to yearn for the time before their local media was bought out by a corporate giant. Film

aficionados long for the days when the marquee wasn’t cluttered with the same tentpole movies produced by Marvel Studios and Lucasfilm, both owned by Disney. Their yearning is for a diversity of ideas and voices, something that Disney tries to signal by casting lead actors in their films who aren’t white and male. But there is also the nostalgia induced when these media companies repackage the same old stories told by the same old voices. By buying each other up and extending copyright laws, media conglomerates today arouse our nostalgia for stories that perhaps should be left in the past. When they give us more of the same — another superhero spinoff, another *Star Wars* adventure — they are locking us into nostalgic feedback loops, fanning the flames of yearning so that we’ll want more. And the more a franchise spins away from its original (and especially if the sequels are flops), the more fans will yearn for the original. Familiarity is prized over novelty in this cultural echo chamber, in which the same ideas circulate, trapping consumers in a frozen state of nostalgia.

The strong presence of nostalgia in our culture isn’t due to some widespread failure to come up with anything new. It isn’t that all the ideas have already been thought, or that there’s nothing new under the sun. Nostalgia’s enduring presence in popular culture is a direct result of the practices of media corporations, which have been able to monopolize culture thanks to lax regulation laws. Refusing Disney’s copyright extension demands will stop it and other conglomerates from re-animating their older works. It will help to squelch the retromania that for decades has re-written history as a past without flaws instead of the real nightmare it was for many people. And regulating these companies will prevent them from converging into one great megacorporation. Are we to gaze at Mickey Mouse forever?

JAWS 2
This Time It's Really Really Personal
COCOON
WARGAMES
Uncle Buck
SHORT CIRCUIT
EXPLORERS
BLOCKBUSTER
PEPSI

Chapter 6
The Medium Is the Memory

Marshall McLuhan's famous quip, "the medium is the message," continues to ring true in the digital age.[1] A medium isn't a neutral tool that we pick up and use, sometimes successfully, and other times disastrously. Rather, it is the medium itself, not whatever message or content it carries, that affects human behavior. The message transmitted by a medium "is always another medium."[2] In other words, it's media all the way down. McLuhan felt strongly about this point, writing that the "conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot."[3]

"The medium is the message" helped us to understand our media as more than just the channels through which messages are sent. Take, for example, the circulation of conspiracies on social media. The problem with a social media post questioning Barack Obama's birth certificate isn't only the birtherism in the message; it's also the fact that you saw it while scrolling for recipes or checking a recent notification. Try as we might to use social media better, we're still going to encounter conspiracy theories on Facebook, for instance, because its very structure as a medium facilitates conspiracy. In the age of Big Tech, many people understand that the medium is the message, that the algorithms circulating a conspiracy theory online impact society as much as the conspiracy theory itself.

McLuhan had a penchant for remixing his infamous phrase. The title of his book *The Medium is the Massage* was originally a typo, but McLuhan

loved it so much he decided to go with it. In keeping with this tradition, I want to propose another rendition: the medium is the memory.[4]

One of the effects of any given medium is its ability to serve as a memory aid. If media are extensions of ourselves, as McLuhan wrote, then they are also extensions of our memory. This is especially true of communication media, like writing, and art forms, like photography. When we write something down, for instance, we are taking our thoughts and outsourcing them, fixing them on the page, which does the remembering for us. The information is taken from our heads and placed elsewhere. If we choose to forget, or accidentally do so, that's all right, because the information exists somewhere else. We could paint a picture of something or someone, freezing them forever in a form we can return to in the future, to remind us what they used to look like. If I take a photo at a wedding, part of my memory has now been outsourced to the photo. I can still recall the particulars of the wedding, perhaps with a little mental effort, but so can the photo — and much better than I, since the photo captures visual elements directly. I can think hard about what a wedding guest looked like, or what I wore, or how the tables were decorated. Or I can just look at some photos and be reminded.

We measure time as moving from the past to the future, and for the present to become the past, it must get reconfigured in another dimension of sorts, one we cannot access but with memory. So many things are waiting in that other dimension, out of the present's view. Remembering gives us the feeling that we can control the nature of time, when in reality we cannot. Of course, things are always slipping out of that other dimension and percolating into ours all the time, but that doesn't mean we can just enter the alternate dimension of the past when we want to. Reminiscing allows us to get pretty close, but the yearning feeling that comes with being unable to leave this dimension and cross over into the past is called nostalgia.

But every now and then, it seems like we've crossed the threshold. Some things can trigger involuntary memories quite suddenly: a melody, a scent, or a madeleine dipped in tea. It's almost as if they yank us into that other dimension, at times quite unexpectedly. Ruminating on the relationship between these triggering objects and memory, Marcel Proust writes in the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time*:

> … the souls of those we have lost are held captive in some inferior creature, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate object, effectively lost to us until the day, which for many never comes, when we happen to pass close to the tree, come into possession of the object that is their prison. Then they quiver, they call out to us, and as soon as we have recognized them, the spell is broken.[5]

He continues:

> It is the same with our past. […]. The past is hidden outside the realm of our intelligence and beyond its reach, in some material object… which we do not suspect. It depends on chance whether we encounter this object before we die, or do not encounter it.[6]

These objects are the relics of our past, and we can capture and study them if we're lucky. They hold the keys to certain parts of our memory. But with the rise of digital technology, these relics of the past are much easier to encounter today, simply because we can so quickly and efficiently outsource our memories to high-fidelity media to remember for us.

Centuries before social media, the creation of memories was aided by the plastic arts in an attempt to preserve history in marble, paint, and stone. Later, technological media like photography and phonography made preservation easier and limned a more faithful rendering of the past. The recorded artifacts of popular culture, from classic movies to old hit songs,

are themselves nostalgic objects from other times that awaken in us a stream of involuntary memories, luring us to believe we've been given entry to the remote dimension of the past. Our access to these artifacts means we can gaze into that dimension whenever we want, and there is so much of history embalmed in media that one may never run out of the past.

For a long time, people have been anxious about the power of media to remember for us. Plato worried that we would lose our capacity to remember if we wrote down our thoughts.[7] Critics of digital media like Nicholas Carr and Sherry Turkle have noted the dangers of easy digital recall and the extent to which digital technologies make forgetting nearly impossible.[8] Pretty much anything can be quickly captured in photo, video, audio, or even writing and recalled within seconds on smartphones, computers, tablets, paper, and the like.

Remembering is a healthy act, and there are many technologies we can use to aid our memory. The app Timehop digs through old posts and shows users what they posted in the past, reminding them of the memories they outsourced to social media. Even something as simple as writing a todo list on your phone can help you to remember basic tasks. But there is a dark side to too much remembering. Forgetting is equally important because, as Sherry Turkle indicates, it "offers clues about who we are."[9] If we can't forget past traumas, partners, friends, experiences, and so forth, how can we settle into our lives in the present? We must forget some things to understand who we are in the present and who we want to be in the future.

About technology's capacity to shape our memory, Turkle offers a dire warning: "Artificial remembrance will be the great leveler."[10] And yet, as Walter Ong pointed out, this "artificiality is natural to human beings."[11] He believed that technology "does not degrade human life but on the contrary enhances it."[12] Well, which is it? The great leveler or the great enhancer? Like nostalgia, itself paradoxical, technology is both.

In her book *The End of Forgetting*, Kate Eichhorn explains how social media keeps children from ever "leav[ing] home" because their childhood has been extensively documented online by their parents.[13] In the digital age, kids grow up with nearly every moment of their young lives archived on social media. She argues that this is a new phenomenon, as people born in the second half of the twentieth century had far fewer methods of documenting childhood.[14] She fears that the over-documentation of children's lives on social media will lead to "the possibility of a perpetual childhood," instead of the disappearance of childhood, a fear once felt by parents in the 1980s and 1990s, when media theorists like Neil Postman were worried that watching television would give kids early access to the adult world.[15] "Can one ever transcend one's youth if it remains perpetually present?" she asks.[16] The answer remains to be seen, although there is the possibility that childhood memories documented on social media may not always remain present. All it takes is an account deactivation or a simple deletion for recorded memories to vanish.[17] Is it worse to archive memories publicly forever, or to have them disappear with one click?

"On the blue screen two scenarios of memory are possible," Svetlana Boym wrote. There is either "a total recall of undigested information bytes or an equally total amnesia that could occur in a heartbeat with a sudden technical failure."[18] In the digital age, the line between recall and loss is blurry. Information is either stored forever or wiped away accidentally. Increasingly, our anxiety about machines remembering for us is being matched by the fear of them forgetting.

Unlike analog media, the digital technology of the twenty-first century allows us to outsource as many of our memories as we'd like and then carry them around with us. Unless memories are deleted in a variety of ways — account deactivation, losing or damaging a device, the disappearance of online sites — they follow us wherever we go, relieving us of the burden to remember, but also keeping terminal memories alive in the present, forever.

The result is that “loss is itself lost,” as Mark Fisher wrote.[19] These memory outsourcers contribute to the perpetual present of the digital age: nothing forgotten, everything now. Our technologies are even programmed to forget for us, thanks to the popularity of ephemeral content on social media. A consequence of this memory outsourcing is a kind of widespread amnesia. My smartphone remembers to unlock, but I have forgotten why I picked it up.

Media Nostalgia

When I was younger, my grandmother gifted me a cassette player for my birthday. It was my first ever portable stereo. The problem was, I didn’t own a single cassette tape. In fact, I didn’t own *any* kind of physical media yet. This was 2001, the dawn of the mp3 era, and the cassette already had its time to shine. Still, the outdated stereo was what I received, so my mother drove me to a now-defunct entertainment store called Media Play, and I picked out my first piece of recorded music: Daft Punk’s *Discovery*, on tape.

Some of my fondest memories of that time are listening to *Discovery* on the stereo while building Lego sets. It was the end of August, and things in my life were changing. Autumn always arrives late in Georgia, but by September I could already smell the fall air: cool, distant, mysterious. Shadows on the road grew longer. Halloween masks lined store shelves, and for the first time in my young life, they scared me a little less. Nights fell earlier. I was at that strange junction between childhood and my teen years, and *Discovery* was the soundtrack.

At some point during my adolescence, I lost the *Discovery* tape and forgot all about it. Years later I remembered it, although I can’t say why. Perhaps because I was reaching the end of high school — another strange junction — and I wanted to look back one last time and see who I’d

become. The Media Play in town had shuttered, so I drove to Best Buy and bought the album on CD. But it wasn't the same. I eventually found the tape in an old box, hidden away, and put it on.

As soon as I heard the opening notes of "One More Time," dim corners of my mind were suddenly lit: *Lego, shadows, Halloween*. Listening to the tape became a kind of drug. I would play it when I wanted to time travel, to escape the disciplinary grind of school or to just drown out the everyday. I took it with me to college and escaped into it regularly, when no one was around. The tape sounded like memory — *my* memory. The CD just couldn't replicate the sound of memory; it was too pristine, too high-definition. The tape was different: slightly warped, hissing during the silences, with no way to select and skip tracks. Rewinding and fast-forwarding, you could end up anywhere. It will always be a kind of talisman for me.

"Nostalgia — like memory — depends on mnemonic devices," Boym wrote.[20] And a bygone medium, like a cassette tape, is a kind of mnemonic device that can elicit nostalgic feelings for several reasons. Media scholars Manuel Menke and Christian Schwarzenegger note that we become attached to so-called "older" media technologies simply because we grew up with them. Individuals born in the latter half of the twentieth century might watch a movie on VHS instead of streaming it because they normalized VHS as part of their lifeworld growing up and, therefore, believe it to be more authentic. When new media appear and replace the media we're used to, a process known as media change, we turn to familiar media to weather the change.[21] This particular yearning for past media is called media nostalgia. Media nostalgia can comfort us while we learn to incorporate new media technologies into our lives. The *Discovery* cassette was a familiar technology to me in a time of great media change, as portable media players started replacing compact discs in the 2000s. So were VHS tapes at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, when I had to

quickly learn to use the teleconferencing platform Zoom to attend work meetings and teach my classes. There were several nights I watched classic movies on VHS after spending hours lecturing on Zoom. To cope with both the uncertainties of a deadly global health crisis and the introduction of a new technology into my daily life, I relied heavily on media nostalgia.

Manuel Menke has studied the recent shift in nostalgia from what sociologist Fred Davis called a nostalgia wave of "media celebrities, old movies, TV shows, popular music styles, and dated speech mannerisms" to a nostalgia for older media technology itself.[22] No longer are we just nostalgic for *The Goonies*, for example, we're also nostalgic for watching the 35mm print of it in a movie theater. In fact, the 35mm print of the movie might fill us with nostalgia more than the movie itself does. (Would you feel as nostalgic streaming a remastered cut of *The Goonies* on a high-definition TV?) This feeling, according to Menke, isn't media nostalgia but *mediated* nostalgia, a term often used by media theorist Ryan Lizardi. Whereas media nostalgia is the yearning for past media technologies themselves, mediated nostalgia is nostalgia for "media-unrelated experiences of the past" that are merely channeled through media.[23] Search #nostalgia on TikTok, Instagram or any other social media, and you will fall down a vast rabbit hole of nostalgic images and videos — that's mediated nostalgia, the sights and sounds of the past that might have nothing to do with media but are consumed via media. Yet if the medium really is the message, then it's hard to tease out where the medium ends and the channeled experiences begin. The line between media nostalgia and mediated nostalgia is often blurry. Usually, a little bit of both is involved. Listening to *Discovery*, I'm not only nostalgic for my childhood, but also for cassettes.

Although it's true that the word nostalgia first materialized in response to a burgeoning industrial milieu, as well as the disciplinary regimes of factory work and conscription, its spread was also a peculiar reaction to

changing media ecologies and literacies. The more that people wrote down their feelings, the more likely they'd feel nostalgia. Literate Napoleonic soldiers, in particular, were some of the first to internalize the monumental social shifts that were occurring at the time, penning personal narratives that described these new forms of national mobilization.[24] During the American Civil War, soldiers would write and receive letters at an astonishing rate. Nearly 180,000 letters circulated daily through post offices across the country. Susan J. Matt notes that letter-writing was "crucial for maintaining morale" among soldiers, as it helped alleviate feelings of homesickness. But letters from home also worsened the emotional wellbeing of soldiers. The written words of loved ones would both comfort soldiers during wartime and knock them into homesick spirals. At the same time, the only thing worse than receiving a letter was not receiving one.[25]

There was also a fear that singing certain melodies would generate nostalgia. Rustic songs from back home could aggravate soldiers' homesick feelings, even as the tunes also lifted their spirits. This illustrates the fundamental paradox of media, which is also the paradox of nostalgia: that which comforts also distresses.[26] A mother's words written down, the social media profile of a loved one — frozen in time, long after they're gone — the recorded voice of your partner hundreds of miles away: these captured representations soothe and tease us at the same time, like the woman of Curt's dreams in *American Graffiti*. They are here, but they are not here. We have them near us, but we don't. Media allow us to communicate with the dead and distant, a power that is both a gift and a curse.[27] It can worsen the sense of loss and make us feel nostalgic in the process. And even the sheer possibility that a connection can be made — a message could be sent, a picture could be taken — means that it must be, or else you might yearn harder for it.

The higher the fidelity of a medium — that is, if a medium can more perfectly represent what it captures — the more intense the nostalgia.

Accurate representations of things, encoded in photographs, compact discs, or on the screen, can present truer pictures of the past. There's no need for time travel if you have a sufficient archive of the sights and sounds of older times, but of course this picture-perfect archive can elicit painfully nostalgic feelings. "[N]ostalgia requires the availability of evidence of the past," Linda Hutcheon writes, "and it is precisely the electronic and mechanical reproduction of images of the past that plays such an important role in the structuring of the nostalgic imagination today." And there is so much of the past recorded for us to consume. We "no longer [have] to rely on individual memory or desire" because nostalgia "can be fed forever by quick access to an infinitely recyclable past."[28]

Of course, some high-fidelity media representations aren't perfect at all. They're just edited to appear perfect. Outsourcing ourselves to media enables us to edit, to make things look better or cleaner than they actually were. Looking back with nostalgia, what we yearn for might not be life as it was, but as it has been edited to appear. With advanced editing software, recording artists can sound more polished. People in photos are edited to appear happier; their smiles are brighter, their eyes sparkle. Photography, in particular, is a medium ripe for revision, as it "allow[s] people to arrange their lives in such a way that painful or unpleasant aspects are systematically erased," as Campanella and Dassù write.[29] And yet, the very act of editing, or outright erasing, the pain from the past merely worsens our nostalgia in the present.

Stability and Volatility

No doubt, losing my *Discovery* cassette had something to do with the changing ways I listened to music throughout the 2000s. I didn't purchase another cassette for years, and when I did, it was only for the nostalgia rush. Instead, for most of my teen years, I bought CDs and pirated music with

peer-to-peer software like LimeWire and Napster. I eventually made the transition to iTunes, and my iTunes library became an archive of every piece of music I owned, before streaming came along in the 2010s and changed my listening habits yet again. During all this media change, the *Discovery* tape became a point of stability for me, an unchanging format I could return to and hear the same way.

In the summer of 2010, I started my first band, born from my first year in college, when I locked myself in my dormitory for months on end, too anxious to make friends but too energetic to stop making music. I banged out demos on an old Casio keyboard, and much of what I wrote during that time was shameless throwback synthpop with depressing lyrics. I thought of it as "music to dance/die to." Looking back at those times, I'm amazed at what we didn't know as a band: how to market ourselves, how to choose the right recording studios, but especially how to release our music when we finally had properly mastered recordings. We were faced with several media-related questions. Do we press CDs? Tapes? Vinyl? Which streaming service should we use: Myspace, Bandcamp, Soundcloud, or even Facebook? Although I've since chalked up our indecisiveness to sheer ignorance, at the time it seemed like there was no real consensus. These were the days before Spotify landed in the US, before Apple Music. The question of how to release music was one of media appropriateness. In a time of changing media, which one should we have chosen? The answer wasn't clear.

There are so many artists, independent or otherwise, whose music got lost in the cracks between the eras of piracy and monopolized streaming. Countless hip-hop artists, vaporwave producers, and indie one-offs are nowhere to be streamed today. "The history of hip-hop's blog years is written in dead Mediafire links, removed MySpace pages, and uncleared samples," music critic Nadine Smith writes, herself mourning the loss of "SpaceGhostPurrp loosies" and early Playboi Carti releases during the turn

of the 2010s.[30] Even my own band has been buried beneath broken hyperlinks.

It was during this unstable time, as longstanding media were being replaced by the one device to rule them all, that artists started engineering their music to sound purposely analog. Vintage synthesizers were recorded on four-track tape machines in numerous basements across North America and Europe. Reverb was smeared over poorly recorded vocals. Hiss and crackle clouded rogue samples plundered from the refuse bin of the last century. This was the era of Animal Collective and Ariel Pink, who, in particular, made music that sounded like it was ripped from an obscure video nasty, warped from sitting at the bottom of a cardboard box in a musty old basement. John Maus' 2011 album, *We Must Become the Pitiless Censors of Ourselves*, was like a transmission from a castle in a *Scooby-Doo* episode, or perhaps from a tape in the back of one's mind. It was music that sounded like falling asleep while watching *The CBS Late Movie*, a kind of analog psychedelia in the wide-awake era of digital technology. Hypnagogic pop, as it was later called, sounded haunted, as if the TV kept playing long after you were asleep, beaming midnight signals into your dreams. The genre called attention to the glitches in old machines and our intimate relationship with their spectral quality, their tendency to warp and distort. Put your hand up to the curved screen of a cathode-ray tube TV: you can feel the hair on your fingers stand on end, static coursing through you. Hypnagogic pop wanted to imitate that experience.

The combination of shoddy recording equipment and easily pirated digital audio workstations, or DAWs, produced a scene of bedroom pop musicians making music that sounded anachronistic in the digital age. Boise-based Trevor Powers wrote his debut record as Youth Lagoon at his parents' home during Christmas break. It was called *The Year of Hibernation*.[31] The vocals are nearly indecipherable, distant, at the bottom of a well, cavernous and delicate. Lyrics reference deep memories:

watching fireworks with friends, lost loves, nine-year-old musings, seventeen-year-old revelations. It was released in 2011 to critical fanfare.

Unemployed after earning a master's degree in library science, Ernest Greene moved back into his parents' house in Perry, Georgia, and started recording songs, posting them to Myspace under the name Washed Out. Greene would search for jobs during the day and make music at night, in his childhood bedroom, using a simple laptop setup. He felt stuck in his own life, but music proved to be purposeful. "I don't think it's an exciting thing to move back in with your parents," Greene said in a 2010 interview. "It wasn't exactly depression, but it was some level of failure that I was dealing with. The melodies, those lyrics, they're reminding myself to remain positive. I really didn't have much going for me."[32] But the blogosphere of the early 2010s adored Washed Out's sound, a subgenre of hypnagogic pop that was eventually labeled chillwave. Music blogs like No Pain in Pop and Gorilla vs. Bear circulated Washed Out's debut EP, *Life of Leisure*, which generated enormous buzz. Everyone from *Pitchfork* to *The New York Times* wrote about it.[33] But it wasn't just his catchy, sunbaked tunes that garnered so much attention; it was also the fact that Greene retreated into the bedroom where he grew up, writing late into the night, staring at a laptop screen while his parents slept, a jobless millennial with no future in sight, and all it took was an indie blog to skyrocket him to fame. It was a classic success story, updated for the recession years, a myth that the depressed culture industry so badly needed in a time of despair.[34]

Like Greene, many college graduates moved back in with their parents to ride out the Great Recession, to live their own years of hibernation, and some created music to pass the time. The home bedroom became the epicenter of yet another nostalgia wave at the turn of the 2010s. After all, the childhood bedroom, like the basement, is where the memories are.

Many of the blogs that championed Washed Out and countless other chillwave acts of the early 2010s are now gone. The DIY sites and the indie

artists they wrote about have been replaced by different digital music ecologies that generate their own viral success stories. But the nostalgia of chillwave hasn't disappeared; it has merely evolved. And the enticing stories of out-on-their-luck musicians escaping the world, to eventually return and debut their art, will likely never disappear in the modern age.

The years of the Great Recession were periods of intense nostalgia. An entire generation was instructed to pursue their dreams as careers, to make loads of money doing it, and that hard work would inevitably reward them. Yet when they left high school and college, they were faced with an economy that had no room for them. Since the early 2010s, graduating classes of young people have had to come to terms with the failure of neoliberal capitalism, and a common reaction is to cloak themselves in the blanket of nostalgia, yearning for times when they were happy: as children perhaps, on summer trips long ago, on the roofs of friends' houses, or when they were students. Future economic crises will produce waves of nostalgia, and the hardest hit will be young people.

Nostalgia for the good old days helped many to survive the Great Recession, me included, but there was really no way out of the yearning. There was nothing radical about chillwave, with its hazy vocals recorded over a bed of vintage synths, plinky glockenspiel, and warped tape effects. It inspired good feelings in despondent listeners, and maybe that was enough. But at the time, I didn't want to dance away the nightmare — not *just* that, not *only* that. I knew the deadbeat summer couldn't last forever, and no amount of vintage music gear could make it. It felt privileged to be able to escape into the tape deck and swim through the lush haze. And over the years, as one trauma stacked atop another, and generations of young people buckled beneath the weight, efforts to restore the past became normalized. Those who could afford to escape got out while they still could.

False Memories

In the liner notes for Fleet Foxes' debut album (also released during the Great Recession), Robin Pecknold writes about a startling realization. He details some of his earliest memories — walking with his mom on a beach along the Puget Sound, riding a stolen big wheel, eating an orange popsicle — and then admits:

> These are and have always been some of my most distinct and persistent memories of childhood, so it came as a disappointment to me when one day as a teenager, I opened up a photo album and found pictures of each and every one of those memories. I didn't have a single memory that didn't belong to or somehow grow from pictures my parents had taken of me when I was growing up. Even the scenes I remember so clearly in my head are from the same angles as those photographs, and I don't really know what to make of it. I'm going to guess that I'd seen all these photographs at some point, forgotten they were just photographs, and over time made them into my most tangible memories. That's scary to me in a way.[35]

This is a common realization many have had while digging through old pictures, and it speaks to a general anxiety about media and memory. Pecknold tries to resist the memory manipulation of photographs, but he delights in the "transportive ability" of music to whisk him away to specific moments in time. He admits that he trusts music more than images, which, as he says, have a tendency to plant false memories in one's head. "Music activates a certain mental freedom in a way that nothing else can, and that is so empowering," he admits. "You can call it escapism if you like, but I see it as connecting to a deeper human feeling than found in the day-to-day world."[36]

The truth is, media of all kinds activate this feeling Pecknold describes. Although he trusts music, it too does what photos do, what all media do:

they can contribute to the construction of memory. It can be difficult to remember with clarity all the time. This is why it’s so important to be deliberate with our representations, in marble or in celluloid, because later on they might help us remember whether we like it or not.

Memory isn’t always reliable, or as reliable as a photograph can be. But sometimes it’s completely reliable. Sometimes we remember things so vividly that the sheer act of reminiscing can feel like watching a film. We might be able to dredge up a traumatic memory with ease because it’s been burned into our mind. Or we might rely on a Proustian object, like a well-worn cassette or a madeleine, to trigger our mind to project a reel of memory. If there are gaps in memory, the mind can fill them in with photos and music, or with home videos and the scent of holiday dinners. These cobbled memories are indeed false, in that they might not materialize purely from the folds of the brain. But they aren’t any less true or real.

Recently, a friend brought up a memory from his sixteenth birthday party, and I started to tell him about mine — but I couldn’t remember how I celebrated it. I asked my mother if she had any photos of my party, but she couldn’t find any. I checked my Instagram account, but there weren’t any photos there either. I searched online and off, and I have yet to come across a single documented instance of that day. Did I even throw a party?

Remember to Rewind

As an archive of most of human history, the Internet gives people the power to look up the past. Long forgotten commercials from childhood can be watched on YouTube. Songs buried in the back of your mind can be streamed. One minute you’re scrolling through Twitter, and suddenly someone has posted a piece of pop culture ephemera that unlocks a door in your memory. Out pours a flood of nostalgia that you didn’t ask for. As Campanella and Dassù explain it, “The click of a mouse is enough to

connect with people, places, experiences, and narratives of our past lives."[37] In other words, nostalgia can be felt on demand, with a device, some Wi-Fi, and a simple command.

The Internet can also connect old media aficionados with each other. There are innumerable full walkthroughs of bygone games, from the classics to the flops, on YouTube, each with comments sections overflowing with nostalgic sentiments. Tape trading has also taken on a new life in the digital age. VHS collectors can connect through social media, trade rare tapes, and post their thrift store scores for other likeminded enthusiasts to drool over. During the years I lost my *Discovery* cassette, I considered buying another off eBay. The online auction site is great if you're looking for lost childhood video games or out-of-print media artifacts. Every Halloween my wife and I marathon old horror movies on VHS, and eBay is my go-to website to find the rarest video nasties to add to the collection. If you can remember a device or game from your youth, chances are you'll find it for sale online.

The media of the twentieth century will always remind us of specific time periods. They have become styles in themselves in the present century, as digital media is too pristine, more consolidated. An easy way to elicit nostalgia in the digital age is to reference older electronic media: a corded phone, a CRT television, radio, a black and white film. We don't merely yearn for these technologies in themselves; we yearn for what they can do, what sorts of stories they mediate, what kinds of lifeworlds they influence. But we also pine for what they *cannot* do. The silent film cannot speak, like a talkie can. I can't search the Internet on a typewriter. The stereo my grandmother gave me could only play tapes. It's a different beast than my smartphone or a streaming site.

This doesn't mean that one medium is "better" than another, just that they're different. A gramophone isn't any better than a CD player or Apple Music, but they are all vastly different, because each one was produced in a

different context. They were invented under different circumstances, using different tools to create them, with different supply chains, and they generate different social and behavioral effects.

Media change doesn't happen simply because a current medium is replaced with a better one. There are numerous reasons why one media technology comes to replace another. A new technology might perform a function more efficiently and save people time. Or it might be more portable than the current technology. Or it's cheaper. Or maybe it's all marketing. Maybe the latest technology isn't that much better, but it's sold to the public as if it is. These reasons might suggest that the latest technology is "better" than what we've been using, but we must be careful with this logic. It could trick us into thinking media change is always positive and every new technology makes the world better. If we think this, we might also believe that any anxieties we have about new media will eventually go away, because media change has been happening since antiquity and the world hasn't ended yet (some naïvely insist it's getting better). This perspective claims that every new medium upsets society in similar ways and that the media may change but love, death, sex, and power endure. These human conditions do persist through time, but they don't remain the same as media change. And neither do we. We shape media, and different media shape us differently in return. There are cognitive differences between reading a book and scrolling through your Facebook feed. The age of television gave us Ronald Reagan; the digital age, Donald Trump. So when someone tells you media change is a normal process of life and that we shouldn't worry over new technologies, understand that they are ultimately silencing critical analysis. It might not be their intention — perhaps they are media critics themselves — but anyone who says that new media anxiety is just business as usual inevitably shuts down argument. Just because there are similarities in the paradigm shifts between the invention of the smartphone and the invention of writing does not mean we live in the

same old circus as Plato. If the medium is the message, as Marshall McLuhan said, then as media change, so does everything else.

One thing has stayed the same since the earliest days of writing things down: media facilitate remembering. They archive our memories for us to access later. Whether you're writing a to-do list or filming a video, you are actively capturing reality and outsourcing it elsewhere. Your memories are determined in part by the media you use. Those of us who use social media know this truth well.

Social media is the most powerful digital engine of nostalgia today. This is partly because it encourages users to remain fixed as themselves, so that they're more legible to mechanisms of corporate and state surveillance. But as Mark Fisher wrote, "It's miserable for anyone at all to *be themselves* (still more, to be forced to sell themselves)."[38] Being yourself, as Jenny Odell writes, means branding your identity clearly so that algorithms can advertise to you. It means turning your "habits, desires, and drives" into "units of capital."[39] The horrifying result is that you will "never [be] surprised, challenged, or changed."[40] But because social media is an archive of the self and encourages users to be as "monolithic and timeless as a brand," it also invites them to chase after themselves as they were.[41] Look back at an old post, an old picture, and see how you used to look, what you used to do: you will probably be filled with nostalgia. You might try to recreate yourself as you were, thus further preventing change. And with a command, it can all disappear — deactivated, deleted. Will you yearn still?

As timeless brands, we might not change much, but it seems like everything else is changing all the time on social media. Memes and discourses come and go quickly. When they leave our present awareness, they don't become anything like history or memory. They don't string together in any kind of comprehensible sequence, something we can look back and chart to make sense of the recent past. Instead, when discourses

disappear on social media, they are discarded and glom together to create a giant mass, like the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, but for content: a gyre of Internet debris that floats along, carrying the waste of the digital age. No one knows how big this vortex of discarded memes, jokes, ideas, and discourses is, or where it begins and ends. Looking back over the brief history of the age of Big Tech, we can see a trail of detritus behind us, context-less, disconnected — that's why it might feel like recent history didn't happen.[42]

Because viral things peak and then flatten, they aren't sustainable over a long period of time. This isn't that big of a deal when we're talking about a funny meme, but in the case of news stories, or art, or political ideologies, sustainability is a crucial component of the memory-making process. It's far more difficult to remember things that once went viral, because once they aren't going viral anymore, they're thrown into the refuse bin of the past, which makes them appear more distant to us than they really are. The viral content of yesterday can seem like ancient history today. And without a strong memory, those thrown-away discourses can go viral again and again. Particularly virulent discourses — like the ones that attract attention via nostalgic appeals — can go viral for years. But if they stop replicating, they quickly recede into the past. Dominant powers that have invested heavily in certain viral discourses will fight to keep them virulent, to maintain their power, while other discourses ride the algorithmic wave and then vanish. The age of Big Tech is marked by series of cultural boom and bust cycles, where discourses go viral then disappear, live briefly and die off, only to drift deeply into our social media timelines, like single-use plastic in the ocean.

Part of the reason why memes and discourses have such short lives is because social media prompts users to constantly historicize the present, to archive events immediately after they happen by freezing them in posts online, thus closing the gap between experience and its memory. With

social media, you can yearn for yesterday — literally. Frozen into data, posts and content can be called up at whim, instead of merely forgotten. Before the age of Big Tech, nostalgic cycles were wider. It might take a decade or two for an old style to come back. Now it may take a few years, perhaps a few months, as time periods themselves become memes online. If you can boil a period (the 1990s, the early 2000s, or even a single year, like 2015) down to its aesthetic markers (its fashion, styles, popular songs, and media), make a meme out of it, and share it, you'll likely unlock nostalgia in others, who will give you likes and attention.

Those who lived through the COVID-19 pandemic yearned for the early months of 2020, before the virus lockdowns, because, like everything else in the digital age, our lives before the pandemic were crystallized online. Some were quickly reminded of nostalgia's dastardly nature, as they started to yearn for the very beginning of the pandemic, romanticizing quarantine and the schedule freedoms it brought them.[43] One could quickly scroll backwards into the past and note just how much had changed since the first lockdowns. This is a startling characteristic of social media, this power to pause moments into singular units and collect them for easy access. As the loop between experience and memory shrinks, these nostalgia cycles will speed up.

Our memories may hang around in the present longer than we would like, perhaps even following us into the future in the shape of an endless feed of images dating back to our first moments alive. They might even disappear forever with a simple deletion. The tension between remembering and forgetting will continue to yank us side to side, and there will be those who long to be pulled to one side: either we must always remember everything, or we must forget the past to move forward. This is a false choice. We have to learn to live in the middle.

Chapter 7
Escape Artists

In the episode “Once Upon a Time” from *The Twilight Zone*, Buster Keaton plays a janitor named Woodrow Mulligan, “a rather dour critic of his times,” who’s fed up with living in the year 1890. Prices are going up, horse-drawn carriages are driving too fast, the streets are too noisy, and ad posters are sexualizing women. “What’s our country coming to?” he asks aloud, although we don’t hear him exclaim this. That’s because the first part of the episode is produced as if it were a silent film, with piano accompaniment, title cards, an accelerated frame rate, and Keaton’s exaggerated acting style.

When Mulligan’s employer, Professor Gilbert, announces his latest invention — a time helmet — Mulligan decides to don the helmet and travel forward to 1961, the year in which the episode premiered on television. To his dismay, the world of 1961 is like 1890, only more so: prices have risen even higher, faster automobiles speed through the streets, the noise level has increased, and ads have become more explicitly sexual. The change in setting has also elicited a change in form. No longer shot like a silent film, the episode explodes with sound, as we hear everything from Mulligan’s angry protests to the car horns honking back at him.

Mulligan realizes he has made a huge mistake, thinking that the grass is truly greener in the future. After a boy skates away with his time helmet, and breaks it, Mulligan runs into a scientist, Rollo, who is casually strolling along reading a book. When Rollo realizes that Mulligan is actually from

1890, he is overjoyed. A hopeless nostalgic for the late nineteenth century, Rollo wants to fix the time helmet and go back to 1890, to escape the “age of madness” and return to “those halcyon days.” Once a local repairman fixes the helmet, Rollo steals it, and just as he’s about to travel time, Mulligan tackles him, flinging them both back to 1890.

Weeks later, Mulligan is content having gained a new perspective, but Rollo is frustrated. He is working in Professor Gilbert’s lab, which lacks the equipment from 1961 that he’s used to. He also grouses about the lack of comfy mattresses, TV dinners, and bikinis. To put Rollo out of his misery, Mulligan places the helmet on his head and sends him back to 1961. The utopian and the nostalgic, mirrors of one another, have learned a valuable lesson: bound by context, we will probably be no happier trying to escape it. Or as Rod Serling advises in his epilogue, “Stay in your own backyard… and if possible, assist others to stay in theirs.”[1]

Whether it’s through dreaming of time travel, space travel, getting back to nature, or simply bingeing old movies, many people living today are desperately trying to escape their lives. The line between work and life has blurred, debt has confined many to peonage, the climate is reacting to how capitalism has been treating it, and on it goes. No doubt, viewers can relate to Mulligan’s exclamation: “What’s our country coming to?”

There is no shortage of crises bearing down on us from all sides. Since the birth of the modern era people everywhere have felt a loss of control, and they have yearned to regain that control through escape. We often feel alienated in our own lives, as if we’re sitting in the audience watching our bodies onstage deliver lines without us. Harried and anxious, many of us turn to numerous escape fantasies in our heads and on the screen. At the end of a long day, sometimes I just want to fall into my couch and watch a terrible show. Days of living like this turn into weeks, months, and years, and the anxiety only increases. Searching for a way out, we look to the past or the future — anywhere but the present.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020, many people sought comfort in nostalgic media. In April of that year, as several places across the world were locked down to thwart viral transmission, Kaitlyn Tiffany interviewed psychologist Krystine Batcho for *The Atlantic* about feeling nostalgic during quarantine. Batcho, as she has throughout her career, affirmed nostalgia's healing effects.[2] The article was just one of many published in 2020 telling isolated individuals to indulge in nostalgic pleasures to get them through the pandemic.[3] People turned to video games and virtual environments to feel some kind of control in an out-of-control time. In the early days of the virus, old sporting events, reruns, and reboots streamed online and aired on television. Anything from before the pandemic quickly seemed so much better because life under lockdown was so much worse. Indulging in nostalgic goods to soothe the doom of the present moment was likely beneficial, crucial even for those with compromised mental health, but the reason so many were suffering during the pandemic was because the time before it was flagrantly unjust.

Escape is often a nostalgic act. But we shouldn't blame anyone for wanting to get away. The problems can appear when one escapes and doesn't return. That is the danger of nostalgia: it can seduce us into believing escape is possible and that collective action is impossible, that we can give up trying to better the world for ourselves and others and just disappear from it all. But there are consequences to escaping and never returning. It isn't as simple and harmless as it appears.

The Cabin Myth

After his Naval service in the Second World War and years of working hard jobs with his hands, mostly as a diesel repairman, Dick Proenneke felt the call to escape into the Alaskan wilderness, to live a more thoughtful life close to nature. Throughout most of 1967, he built his own log cabin from

scratch in Twin Lakes. Leaving only a few times to visit family, he remained there for over thirty years. A life removed from civilization was hard work, but Proenneke believed that men of the time had grown used to pressing a button or popping a pill to solve their problems. He felt that men needed to enjoy the thrill of building something all the way to completion, instead of "work[ing] on pieces of things," a failure he attributed to an obsession with teamwork.[4] He saw news media as a scourge. "I honestly don't believe that man was meant to know everything going on in the world, all at the same time," he wrote. "A man turns on the TV and all those commentators bombard him with the local, the national and the international news… and the poor guy with all the immediate problems of his own life is burdened with those of the whole world."[5] So he instead chose a simple existence without modern technologies in an attempt to get back to a way of life that had been swept away by the tide of progress.

Like all nostalgics, Dick Proenneke observed a change in the state of things that didn't sit right with him. He thought that Americans were over-stimulated, that they owned too many material goods claiming to provide comfort. But he knew otherwise:

> I have found that some of the simplest things have given me the most pleasure. They didn't cost me a lot of money either. They just worked on my senses. Did you ever pick very large blueberries after a summer rain? Walk through a grove of cottonwoods, open like a park, and see the blue sky beyond the shimmering gold of the leaves? Pull on dry woolen socks after you've peeled off the wet ones? Come in out of the subzero and shiver yourself warm in front of a wood fire? The world is full of such things.[6]

He learned patience out in the wilderness, a quality in short supply in a world he thought was spinning too quickly for anyone to keep up. Yearning for a different life, he decided to exit from modernity and its alienations.

His observations resonate with anyone weary from marching to the beat of capitalism. But his solution — to leave it all behind and escape to a cabin in the woods — was only a solution for him.

Without bush pilot Babe Alsworth, who founded Port Alsworth, Alaska, with his wife Mary, Proenneke would have likely died from starvation. Babe would regularly fly in groceries for Proenneke. In one trip, he delivered "[f]ifty pounds of sugar, fifty pounds of flour, two gallons of honey, sixty pounds of spuds, two dozen eggs, half a slab of bacon, some rhubarb plants, plenty of mail, and some books."[7] Proenneke notes in his journals that he couldn't have lived in the cabin as long as he did without Babe, that he didn't exactly live the individualistic life he thought so many should. And yet, Proenneke is remembered, like many who leave society for their mythic cabins, as a man who had the guts to take the step into the wild, who could survive as a man should with his hands and wits. Much of his perspective was likely due to a bout of rheumatic fever in the Second World War, which prevented him from fighting in the Pacific theater. Proenneke's friend Sam Keith wrote that the sickness "made him despise this weakness of his body that had temporarily disabled him." Proenneke became obsessed with his physical stamina, likening his body to one of the many machines he was skilled at repairing, and he "mercilessly put it to the test at every opportunity."[8]

Throughout Western history, the cabin myth has promoted rugged individualism as a resistance against the forces of progress. It has seduced many — mostly men — into believing that there once existed a more natural state but that modernity has destroyed it, paving paradise and putting up a parking lot.[9] In this mythology, the cabin is the opposite of the city apartment or the anonymous suburban home. It sits among rolling hills, in a thick glen, on the edge of a mountain, or in the middle of nowhere. The most famous purveyor of the cabin myth was Henry David Thoreau, who

lived in a cabin at Walden Pond in the mid-nineteenth century. His account of his time there has influenced countless escape artists since.

Editor William Allen White wrote in his Pulitzer Prizewinning autobiography that his father forced his family, to his wife's chagrin, to move to a remote log cabin when he was a child, in the late nineteenth century. "My father's idea was to duplicate exactly the cabin in backwoods Ohio where he was born and grew up," White wrote. "He thought he could go back to the golden days of his youth."[10] The family didn't last. Eventually they returned to civilization. "The effort to re-create [a rustic lifestyle]… was also a tacit recognition that it was gone," Susan J. Matt writes about the Whites' cabin.[11] But when White himself was an adult, he and his wife carried on the family tradition by building a cabin compound in the Rocky Mountains, a trend that had become more popular since White's childhood, especially among intellectuals of the time. The preserved cabins now host artists-in-residence, a nostalgic function built upon the initial nostalgia of White's father.[12]

The cabin myth hasn't died in the twenty-first century. When Justin Vernon decamped to his father's Wisconsin cabin to record his debut record as Bon Iver, he was swarmed by the music press. The album, *For Emma, Forever Ago*, catapulted Vernon to indie stardom in part because of its recording process: he, like so many before, left it all behind to isolate himself and craft a singular work of art to document the experience. The image of a midwestern man sporting a beard and recording his emotions in a cabin was powerful enough to spawn several spinoffs. After all, the early 2010s was a time when men grew out their facial hair and packed their closets with flannel shirts.

By 2014, this stereotype of hipster ruggedness, known pejoratively as the "lumbersexual," saturated mainstream culture.[13] *BuzzFeed* boiled down the cultural figure to a handful of aesthetic markers: wood, nature, beards, leather, denim, plaid, and flannel. Yet even *BuzzFeed* could see through the

lumbersexual: “So what sets lumbersexual men apart from lumberjacks? Well, aside from not actually working in the logging industry, lumbersexual men have a CALCULATED look with the desire to be (and be seen) as rugged and the heteronormative version of ‘manly.’”[14] It was a symbol that spoke to men in the 2010s who felt emasculated by the Great Recession, the rise of intersectional feminism, and the digital age. During that decade, folk artists like the Lumineers and Mumford and Sons climbed the charts, and they did so in suspenders and wide brim fedoras. Justin Timberlake went to the woods on his lifeless *Man of the Woods* record in 2018. And Jordan Peterson, a clinical psychologist who achieved celebrity by critiquing gender identity, connected with droves of disaffected young men by teaching a rugged gospel of prairie populism and opposing what he and others saw as the further feminization of society. Justin Vernon, unlike his copycats, eventually grew tired of the cabin myth and sought to disavow it. Over the 2010s, he released a string of experimental, but no less catchy, albums that bore little resemblance to the acoustic heartsick anthems on his debut. Vernon, in short, outgrew the cabin.

Others do not. Mark Boyle, known as “The Moneyless Man,” decided to start living without money in 2008, relying instead on gifts and the “Freeconomy Community” he founded. He grew his own vegetables and dined on leftover restaurant scraps.[15] But for Boyle, a moneyless existence wasn’t enough, so he eventually decided to live in a cabin without any modern digital technology, including his phone. Like other cabin dwellers before him, Boyle documented his off-the-grid life in *The Way Home: Tales from a Life Without Technology*. Channeling Thoreau, he admits in the book that he left civilization because he “wanted to feel the elements in their enormity, to strip away the nonsense and lick the bare bones of existence clean… to search for truth to see if it existed… to feel cold and hunger and fear” and “to live, and not merely to exhibit the signs of life.”[16] He also cites the various catastrophes of the modern day, from climate warming to

technological distraction, as reasons for his departure. His cabin life has allowed him to focus on the little things, but like all who go to their cabins, he enjoys the privilege of ignorance. “One of the many benefits of this way of life is that I’ve completely missed Brexit,” he said in a 2019 interview. “I hear the odd word about backstops, fake news and that kind of thing. But I wouldn’t know any of the details, thankfully.”[17]

Boyle is aware of the cabin myth and its problems. He agrees that typing up his book on a computer when he’s supposed to be living tech-free is hypocritical, but therein lies the problem with Boyle’s approach. Cabin mythologizers make the mistake of condemning all technologies equally. Sure, we may feel anxious checking our smartphones, but who hates flush toilets? Or refrigerators? These inventions have undoubtedly changed society, the environment, and the way we think, but do we throw them out, along with the kitchen sink, because a handful of hyper-capitalists are destroying the Earth and its inhabitants? Is the solution to the problem of civilization really to go native?

The thing is, escape artists don’t really want to live free of distractions. On the contrary, they want to live a completely distracted life. Their desire is to reduce all of life down to mere survival, to spend their hours each day working to stay alive so they don’t have to face the world, to make it as difficult as possible to live so that *they don’t have to think anymore*. Their escape isn’t facilitated just by moving to a remote region, but by working, day in and day out, to survive. They preoccupy themselves with work not to escape nostalgia, as psychologist Edmund S. Conklin prescribed in the early twentieth century, but to live a nostalgic existence away from the hustle and bustle of civilization.[18] The same goes for people who choose to live in the past by eschewing modern comforts and styles. In 2016, *BBC News* profiled Joanna Francis of Lincolnshire, who lives as if it were 1939. She warms water with fire, listens to old records, and even has a bomb shelter in case of air raids. (Her smartphone ringtone is an air raid siren.[19]) *BBC News* ran

a similar profile of Ben Sansum, a Cambridgeshire flight attendant, who lives as if it were 1946. Sansum cooks on a fully-restored Victorian range and dresses in Forties fashion. His house resembles a museum of 1940s style, a kind of dead zone where time itself has frozen to resist the fast rate of change. Fittingly, the view outside his window is a cemetery.[20] Neither of these quirky nostalgics can live without some contemporary accessories, like smartphones or refrigerators, and simply injecting the objects of the past into the present can't roll back the clock. But it does keep them busy maintaining daily illusions. They're so preoccupied using older, time-consuming appliances that they don't have time to attend to the present.

Living a life of escape is hard work, because it takes up lots of time and energy to fend off civilization. All that time spent working wrenches you out of the present. Mark Boyle admits that it's hard work to live in a cabin without money, but to him, it's easier than having to face the problems of the world. Survivalists like him yearn for the day they can live apolitically, when they can spend their time surviving instead of living, working hard to keep the illusion going. Theirs is a nostalgia for living away from the present, outside clock time, where they never have to worry about anyone else.

Douglas Rushkoff has diagnosed survivalists with what he calls "present shock": the trauma of living in a perpetual present, when "everything happens now." Present shock impedes our ability to fight for the future, directing us instead to work towards alleviating immediate stress in the present. Rushkoff sees the "fantasy of living off the grid" as a side effect of present shock, one that also drives many to dream of the various apocalyptic scenarios (nuclear war, climate collapse) that could lead to such a disconnected existence, in which "farming, maintaining shelter, and maybe defending one's family" become their primary responsibilities.[21]

But going off the grid won't cure one's nostalgia. Surely, even as he writes letters to friends and family alone in his cabin, Mark Boyle feels the

sting of nostalgia. “I don’t romanticize the past,” he admitted in an essay. “But I don’t romanticize the future either.”[22] At home in the long lineage of survivalists rewilding themselves to escape the mess of the world, Boyle, in fact, romanticizes the present.

“Contemporary nostalgia is not so much about the past as about the vanishing present,” Svetlana Boym wrote at the turn of the millennium.[23] This sentiment has proven true with each passing year, as nostalgia for lost presents intensifies. Some feel like they are stuck in the wrong present, that there is another present out there somewhere, where they really belong, where things are much better, and where they’re happier. This feeling is explored in the 2013 film *Coherence*, which tells the story of eight friends at a dinner party on the night that a passing comet triggers several parallel universes to collide into each other. The characters slowly realize there are multiple houses in the neighborhood with multiple dinner parties featuring multiple versions of themselves. After making contact with a few of their copies, they come to the conclusion that there might be evil versions of themselves out there. (Some in the group wonder if *they* are, in fact, the evil ones.) Emily, the film’s protagonist, eventually leaves the original house and wanders through the night, passing by different versions of the house. She peers through the windows at copies of her friends fighting, each scene more violent than the last. Finally, she stumbles upon a house in which everyone is laughing, unaware that anything cosmic is happening. She breaks into this version of the house, incapacitates her double, and replaces her.

Given the chance, knowing that “the world here and now is but one of the un-definable number of possible worlds,” as Zygmunt Bauman wrote, the sufferers of the present might also desire to break into parallel universes and replace their copies.[24] Until then, the fear of missing out on a life in another timeline, one in which we’re happier but which we cannot

experience, might just drive us to search for alternate presents to which we can escape.

How to Disappear Incompletely

You don’t have to retreat to a cabin in the woods to escape. There are certainly places to flee to that are less rustic, especially if you aren’t interested in working hard to survive. For those who want to escape so their every need is met, there are plenty of options. Planned neighborhoods offer all the comforts of community with none of the risks, where you can live out a *Truman Show* sort of existence: your every need met, as if the world were made for you. In these communities, the poor are out of sight completely, and local eccentricities are coated in a uniform gloss, smoothing away unpleasant sights. They are sites of violent gentrification, where the privileged can hide out when things get messy.

But if you’re looking to go off the grid completely, you can attend a digital detox camp, where you’ll reconnect with yourself and others by unplugging from distracting technology. Camp-goers chuck their laptops for typewriters and learn archery and rock climbing. If you can’t attend a camp, you can just change your lifestyle by putting down your phone in social settings or installing regulatory apps that limit the amount of time you spend scrolling. You might even give up the smartphone altogether, opting instead for a flip phone or perhaps learning to live without one. You can sever ties with your Internet provider and remove service from your home completely, so that you have to leave to get work done. And then when you’re home, you’re off the grid: no emails, no notifications, no pornography. All of these popular suggestions indulge the nostalgia you might feel for a life without distractions, where you can finally focus and get things done, where you can be as productive as you can be. But really,

logging off to increase your productivity is the very nostalgic gesture capitalism wants you to make.

Stressed people may dream of going off the grid, which means pulling their attention away from the Internet. But you can't escape the "grid" that easily, because there is no singular grid. We move within overlapping grids constantly: the Internet, yes, but also financial grids, health protocols, insurance coverages, legal codes, and so forth. There is a dizzying matrix of constraints we must navigate through as long as we agree to live in civilization.

Total escape is probably impossible for the average person, and to the degree that it is possible, it can encourage passivity at a time when we need those who are rightly critical of society to stay and help us fight for the future. As Jason Strange points out, going off the grid to live a subsistence-oriented life, also known as homesteading, "does little to change the social structures of capitalist plutocracy."[25] The exploitative system of capitalism keeps exploiting, whether or not homesteaders leave civilization behind to build their own farms. Even when they aren't out to change the system itself but to experience "a different way of *being*," they are still "indelibly marked by the system they dream of escaping."[26]

In *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, Jenny Odell provides a brief history of escapist living and notes the impossibility of pure retreat. Although she understands why people desire an escape from the chaos of modern society, she sees retreat as an act of giving up. Individuals who observe the injustices of civilization and feel the urge to leave it behind are the ones who share a responsibility with the rest of us to fight for more equitable solutions.[27] They may need to depart occasionally; in fact, it's healthy to step away from it all now and then. But it is imperative to return. This was Thoreau's point, so often missed by cabin mythologizers. He didn't go to the cabin at Walden Pond to escape, but to recharge and return. Odell notes that writer and Trappist monk Thomas Merton came to the

same conclusion in the 1950s. Realizing that “contemplation of the spiritual and participation in the worldly… were far from mutually exclusive,” Merton disavowed his earlier retreatist beliefs.[28] He understood that “[r]emoval and contemplation were necessary to be able to see what was happening, but that same contemplation would always bring one back around to their responsibility to and in the world.”[29] She calls this “standing apart,” which is a “hybrid reaction” that “take[s] the view of the outsider without leaving” and “means not fleeing your enemy, but knowing your enemy, which turns out not to be the world… but the channels through which you encounter it day to day.”[30]

Standing apart is a healthy corrective to present shock. It refuses to romanticize the present as the time we must escape further into, away from the future and its unknowns. “To stand apart is to look at the world (now) from the point of view of the world as it could be (the future),” writes Odell.[31] To that end, standing apart is an act of radical nostalgia: it takes the perspective of the future and looks backwards to our present, not to yearn for our time, but to “contemplate and participate” in the present as if we were already living in the future. It’s what Woodrow Mulligan does in *The Twilight Zone*: escapes into the future for a while, only to return to the present with a fresh perspective.

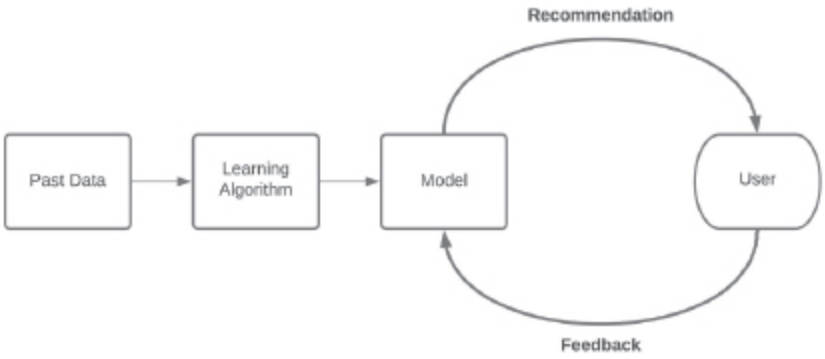
I am not immune to the siren song of escape. When I graduated college in the early 2010s, I walked into a job market decimated by the 2008 economic collapse. With two useless liberal arts degrees, I had no skills legible to the market. I worked at a transcription company, writing down the notes of financial bankers in anonymous offices across the country. They talked about meeting with this or that couple to plan retirement, invest for the future, and manage wealth. I worked as a dishwasher at an Asian-Mexican fusion restaurant founded by two white Americans. I interned at a small music PR firm, hocking albums by musicians who were rich enough to afford the publicity but not talented enough to secure label management.

I quit after six months. Eventually, I found myself jobless and depressed with nowhere to go. I went into exile, quartering in my parents' house for several years.

And I just started writing. I wrote and wrote. I didn't want to disappear between the cracks. I wanted to return and tell people what I went through, how scary it was to feel like I missed the train, that I jumped and didn't make it across the ridge, that I had made a terrible mistake somewhere along the way. I took a job as a part-time middle school music teacher, and that's when I realized I wanted to tell others what I learned much later: that modern life is punishing, and it will feel like retreat is the only option. But we must stand apart instead. The rich are getting richer, the viral strains of prejudice are breaking out everywhere, and the future is dimming. There is far too much at stake to just escape.

But if you're fed up with the world and privileged enough to afford the price of disappearance, then you may be in luck. Wealth, after all, is the ticket out of the drudgery of life. And make no mistake, the rich are already hiding away. They are retreating to their bunkers and escape pods. They are trying to leave the planet, or hide deep inside it. That's what it means to be wealthy: to afford to live separately from the rest of us. As Douglas Rushkoff writes, the rich are "simply succumbing to one of the dominant ethos of the digital age, which is to design one's personal reality so meticulously that existential threats are simply removed from the equation." The technologies and services the wealthy can purchase cocoon them from the problems of the world. They are proof you don't have to go off the grid to escape. Instead of joining us in the fight for egalitarian solutions, they are riding out the storms in lavish compounds, fortifying themselves with digital technology in an attempt to "climb back into the womb" while the world burns.[32]

Part III
The Past in the Future


Recommendation
Past Data
Learning Algorithm
Model
User
Feedback

Chapter 8
Nostalgorithm

In 2012, Joan Serrà and a team of scientists at the Artificial Intelligence Research Institute of the Spanish National Research Council discovered a shocking trend: timbral variety in pop music had been decreasing since the 1960s.[1] Using computer analytics, they broke down nearly half a million recorded songs to a set of variables, including loudness, pitch, and timbre, and found that most Western pop songs were getting louder and sounding the same.

Serrà's findings marked a watershed moment for the music discovery industry, a billion-dollar race to build perfect models of songs so that algorithms can recommend them to listeners. In the early 2010s, the leading music intelligence company was The Echo Nest, which Spotify acquired in 2014.[2] Founded in the MIT Media Lab in 2005, The Echo Nest's algorithms could measure recorded music using a set of parameters quite similar to Serrà's, including acousticness, danceability, instrumentalness, speechiness, and other clunky descriptors.[3] To round out their models, the algorithms could also scour the Internet for anything ever written about a given piece of music.[4] The goal was to design a complete fingerprint of a song, to reduce music to data and better guide consumers to the songs they were searching for.

In 2011, The Echo Nest released the Million Song Dataset, a detailed report of "sonic and cultural attributes" of one million songs.[5] By the time Spotify bought the company, it boasted over thirty-five million songs

analyzed using one trillion data points.[6] The Echo Nest's data gave Spotify extraordinary recommendation powers to track your listening habits and suggest new music accordingly. Once a user has listened to enough music through Spotify to establish a taste profile, the recommender systems simply get to work. The more you use Spotify, the more Spotify can affirm or try to predict your interests.[7]

Serrà's findings revealed that, long before the digital age, broader cultural algorithms determined what kinds of songs would go viral. Decades leading up to The Echo Nest's creation, popular music was engineered by songwriters and producers to be more consumable. When there were no Echo Nest parameters, the music industry of the twentieth century relied on other kinds of data. So-called "merchants of cool" hit the streets in search of the next big trend, conducting studies on teenage desire that generated tons of data. That data was then consulted to manufacture the next hit. It's no surprise that pop music started sounding the same with the rise of the modern music industry.

But does all that data reveal a general sameness in pop music? Or does it create sameness? If we know the formula to the perfect hit song, wouldn't we use it to write songs? And if every song follows a similar formula, wouldn't they all sound the same as a result? Does the very act of reducing things to data make them similar?

As greater efforts are made to break down music to variables legible to computer algorithms, we will likely see a greater reduction in sonic differentiation in Western mainstream popular music, especially if the data that's generated is used to recommend music to listeners. If that's the case, then digital algorithms will merely project the data of the analog years of the music industry into the digital present. New songs will sound the same as the old ones.

One might assume that digital algorithms are more neutral than cultural algorithms, because they're run by computers and not people. But it's

crucial to remember that algorithms are created by people, which means they have biases embedded in them. Because we're humans, our very methods used to gather data are themselves biased. And those biases not only determine taste but also the fate of individuals. Researchers like Safiya Umoja Noble and Virginia Eubanks have studied how algorithms disproportionately discriminate against the poor and women of color, redlining the disempowered and locking them into statistical profiles for algorithms to easily compute.[8] Just as racist algorithms do not accurately describe people as they are, The Echo Nest's data points aren't the final, objective descriptors of all music. They are merely tools that a few computer programmers have decided to use to describe the world. Algorithms aren't unbiased; the danger is trusting they are.

And algorithms are trained on people's past behaviors and tastes. They "repeat our past practices," Cathy O'Neil said in a 2017 talk.[9] They circulate styles that, according to the data, people want to consume, so their tendency is to keep recommending similar styles, assuming that's what we want. If our tastes slightly change, the algorithm adapts. But the goal of a recommender algorithm isn't to surprise or shock us but to affirm us. The process looks a lot like prediction, but it's merely repetition of the same old thing.

Spotify is in the business of predicting user preference, but no streaming platform can accurately predict taste. Humans are too messy to be predicted consistently. Instead, Spotify builds models of users and makes predictions by recommending music that matches the models. Stuck in these feedback loops, musical styles start to recur with little optimal differentiation because songs are created according to a pre-determined vocabulary of Echo Nest descriptors. Eventually, listeners come to resemble the models streaming platforms have created. It isn't *really* prediction, just your desires echoing off the walls of the nest. Over time, some may grow intolerant of anything other than an echo. That which does not affirm might be disdained.

Fortified against anything not slotted into a normative grid, those who want only echoes may do what it takes to keep out the voices they think don't belong.

Predicting the future with the data of the past merely repeats the past. As I explain in the next chapter, data can help scientists better understand problems like global warming, but data can't provide the answers to all of life's questions. Humans can't be reduced to data. Neither can culture, or history. There are always going to be some things that can't be quantified or counted. And yet, in the digital age, data is seen as the secret code of existence: crunch the numbers correctly, and you'll find the truth. Even if this were true, there is so much data being gathered all the time, it's impossible to make sense of it. This doesn't dissuade Big Tech from extracting loads of data from users anyway, more than anyone could ever comprehend, and outsourcing the task of making decisions to algorithms, which cannot think like a human can. One way that a corporation can extract data is by luring users with nostalgic content. Once data is extracted, algorithms process it to affirm your desires, to keep you scrolling and consuming, and to predict the future. But a future predicted by algorithms will remain stuck in the past.

Bot Politics

With the rise of Big Tech came the increased presence of algorithms in our lives. They help determine the music we listen to, the shows we watch, the news we read, and the opinions we hold. For some time now we have been *thinking* like them — that is, thinking computationally, which James Bridle defines as "the belief that any given problem can be solved by the application of computation."[10] In *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future*, he lists several side effects of computational thinking: bad digital metaphors (like the cloud, which is nothing like an actual cloud),

technological black boxes (like our inability to know how a neural network thinks), and automation bias (or a greater faith in machines than humans to make decisions).

To think computationally is to think like a bot, which is an algorithm programmed to perform certain tasks, like scraping content on social media, answering questions, or spamming your inbox. Bots seem like living beings not because they are, but because they have real-world effects. They influence politics, social relations, and individual wellbeing. A bot is what I call a babbling corpse: it is both automated and intelligent, dead and alive.[11] Millions of the comments submitted to the US Federal Communications Commission in 2017 about net neutrality were by bots, not humans.[12] Sock puppet accounts were responsible for half a million tweets about Brexit in 2016, with the majority of them posting pro-Leave messages.[13] Bots were instrumental in spreading fake news during the 2016 US presidential election.[14] No one can say just how many bots are operating online today and how vast their influence is. But, increasingly, we are living in a world shaped by them.

Social bots are “automatic posting protocols” that follow specific scripts.[15] In his definitive book on the topic, Alexander Galloway defines a protocol as “any type of correct or proper behavior within a specific system of conventions.”[16] Without computer protocols like the Hypertext Transfer Protocol, or HTTP, we wouldn’t be able to send or receive files on the Internet. Humans negotiate certain protocols, too: practicing proper rules of etiquette in certain social groups, or greeting someone from another culture in a specific manner. But in a world that’s constantly in flux, relying heavily on protocols to make decisions can establish rigid patterns of behavior. That’s because when we follow a protocol, we are essentially operating blindly — kind of like a bot — and behaving according to a set of rules and rationales. Sometimes this is necessary in certain contexts. If you’re trying to prevent contagion transmission, you might follow specific protocols to

keep yourself and others safe, like maintaining a fixed distance and wearing a face mask. However, in an attempt to “make concrete our fundamentally contingent and immaterial desires,” acting according to protocol, like a bot does, can at times establish limits and generate sameness.[17]

A social bot doesn’t know what it knows, but it speaks nonetheless. And we react to and interact with it, often because we are unaware that there’s a bot behind the screen. When a social bot speaks, its language is cobbled together from information scraped from existing data. It babbles like a real account managed by an actual person, but it is a corpse, a profile that only seems real. There are times when content generated from existing data can appear lifelike, human even, but too often the result is uncanny. To use an example from pop culture, artificial intelligence can generate music to mimic the styles of dead singers by cobbling together their songs, a process known as deepfaking. You can listen to deepfake versions of Frank Sinatra and Nirvana, but you won’t hear anything new. Deepfake music can only provide the illusion of newness by reconfiguring past data: lyrics, melodies, and musical textures from recordings that already exist. Like the touring hologram of Whitney Houston, deepfakes don’t just impersonate others. They re-animate the dead, spawning jerky undead surrogates that perform their programmed tricks for us. They are a bot’s idea of what the past sounds like.

A culture that thinks like a bot also “projects a future that is like the past,” Bridle explains, because “[t]hat which is gathered as data is modelled as the way things are, and then projected forward — with the implicit assumption that things will not radically change or diverge from previous experiences.” In a world reliant on computation to make sense of things, “[t]hat which is possible becomes that which is computable.”[18] As a result, algorithms shape us in ways consistent with data that already exists. The result is more of the same: a present that looks like the past and a future that isn’t one.

In other words, algorithms can only repeat the information of the past. Sometimes this can generate strange and uncanny results, like deepfake music, but it can also cause harm. Data scientist Cathy O'Neil called Donald Trump an algorithm after he continued repeating the point that increased COVID-19 testing created more positive cases. "Trump has a very simplistic model of the world, focused on data — ratings, case counts, polls — but utterly independent of reality, duty, guilt or conscience," she wrote in 2020.[19] After A Level exams were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulations, or Ofqual, in the UK created an algorithm to predict exam grades, based on student ranking and the historical grade distribution of certain schools. Almost forty percent of students were shocked to receive grades lower than what they expected. Private school students saw their grades inflate much higher than usual, but high-achieving students at historically underperforming schools suffered the most. The Ofqual algorithm merely projected the past, with all its inequalities, into the present.[20]

Data gatherers try to figure out the present, to make it coherent so that business will operate more efficiently. They build models to do this; the problem is, all models have blind spots.[21] If you build a model to keep your supply chain running efficiently, or to increase the amount of high-frequency trades you make daily, it could be blind to the exploitation of sweatshop workers or the risk of financial collapse. It might ignore these factors altogether, unless you purposely include them in the models. Models are meant to solve present problems without bias, but, as Douglas Rushkoff reminds us, they "are really just chasing after what has already happened and ignoring whatever is going on now."[22]

Models are based on algorithms, and algorithms rely on feedback. "If Amazon.com, through a faulty correlation, started recommending lawn care books to teenage girls," Cathy O'Neil writes, "the clicks would plummet, and the algorithm would be tweaked until it got it right."[23] The algorithm in

O’Neil’s scenario wants to figure out what we humans like, and we tend to like things we recognize. So, if the algorithm picks up on this, then it’ll continue recommending to us recognizable things, hoping that we’ll like them. This is not a recipe for novelty; an algorithm won’t show you something brand new. It will only recommend derivatives of the things you like — familiar, older things.

Retrobait

Major corporations are constantly vying for our data, but by inducing nostalgia, they have a better chance at extracting it. When Instagram launched in 2010, it invited users to give up their data by appealing to their nostalgia for the past, a strategy also employed by other social photography apps like Hipstamatic and, later, Dispo.[24] Instagram’s array of filters allowed users to coat their digital photographs in the haze of analog before posting them and, thus, turn mere moments into memories. Online genealogy sites like Ancestry and MyHeritage are no different. They draw customers in with the promise of revealing their family trees through the science of genome sequencing, and nostalgia is often their bait. MyHeritage offers a service called Deep Nostalgia: users can upload family portraits and watch as artificial intelligence animates their faces to smile, nod, and look around quizzically. Ancestry gives its users access to billions of historical records, including an archive of Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalogues from the twentieth century, as well as various periodicals and newspapers. Users can scroll nostalgically through stories and images from the past, imagining what their ancestors purchased and what news they read.

Nostalgia marketing in the digital age relies a lot on what I call “retrobait”, a nostalgic lure that grabs your attention and, oftentimes, invites you to give up your data. Because nostalgia attracts attention and promotes brand loyalty, companies today deploy retrobait to entice people to use their

services. Retrobait can openly appeal to nostalgia, like MyHeritage's Deep Nostalgia service or Spotify's Wrapped and Time Capsule features. Or retrobait can induce nostalgia subtly through hidden references like Easter eggs. (Sometimes retrobait appeals in both ways simultaneously.) Individuals on social media can produce their own retrobait to recruit followers and, thus, keep them scrolling. One can follow numerous "nostalgic aesthetics" accounts that specialize in posting pop culture from the late twentieth century, from 1980s television commercials to vintage softcore pornography. Sometimes these accounts post content that imitates the styles of the past. There are dozens of "retrowave," or "synthwave," accounts on Instagram that mix old content with new content that just appears old, and the most popular ones are followed by hundreds of thousands of users from around the world. You can also find countless retrowave musicians on streaming platforms; their trick is producing music that sounds like the 1980s, and they rack up tons of plays doing so. Retrobait's nostalgic references are easily shareable across social media and streaming services, by both people and bots, so once you start consuming retrobait it's hard to stop – because the algorithms keep recommending it to you. As data is extracted from us, it's used to create more retrobait, to help tech companies figure out what nostalgic references will keep us clicking and streaming.

Yet as people have come to question what it is tech companies actually do with all this data, privacy violation concerns have made matters worse. High-profile data breaches have weakened public trust in retrobaiting tech companies, like Timehop, which suffered a massive security breach in 2018.[25] Data breaches have also caused some of the larger online genealogy companies to scale back and several smaller ones to shut down completely.[26] There are also concerns over the usage of personal data by law enforcement. Raw data uploaded to genealogy site GEDMatch has been used to solve cold cases — most notably to identify the Golden State Killer

decades after his span of crimes.[27] And in 2020 private equity firm Blackstone announced its intention to purchase Ancestry, a decision that raised new privacy questions, considering that a few years earlier, Motel 6 (also owned by Blackstone) was caught handing over guest lists to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, leading to the detainment of several Washington state residents.[28]

Streaming platforms also rely on retrobait to lure consumers and record their data. On Netflix, one can find numerous examples of retrobait. Folded in with Netflix original sequels, prequels, and reimaginings are *Stranger Things*, *Everything Sucks!*, *Fuller House*, and a reboot of *The Baby-Sitters Club*. These and other series offered by the streaming giant often take place in some time before our own — specifically, in vaguely retro idylls before the digital age. Others are set in versions of the present that are milder, less anxious, more serendipitous, and that feel like the past. To soothe the daily trauma of the present, many today yearn for these analog worlds, and Netflix is there to provide them and gather data in the process. Netflix collected data on viewers who streamed its 2018 choose-your-own-adventure film *Bandersnatch*. Part of the *Black Mirror* franchise created by Charlie Brooker, the film was a massive hit, not only because viewers are able to choose how the story unfolds, but also because it's set in 1984 and features a plethora of nostalgic Eighties references: a musical score heavy on synthesizer and 1980s pop hits, dated video game graphics, and plenty of analog media technology, from VCRs to CRT televisions. Disney's streaming platform, Disney+, drew in over eight million new subscribers by playing up the sitcom nostalgia in its 2021 Marvel miniseries *WandaVision*.[29] Each of the early episodes takes place in a decade-specific sitcom setting, starting in the 1950s and ending in the late 2000s. Viewers tuned in every week to see how the series would move forward in time and aesthetics, paying homage to classic sitcoms along the way, like *The Dick*

Van Dyke Show, *The Brady Bunch*, *Full House*, *Malcolm in the Middle*, and *Modern Family*.

In the music industry, the push to extract our data with nostalgia has led to the rise of "streambait" or "Spotifycore," music genres that rely on simple songwriting formulas to keep us streaming. But a closer look reveals that most streambait is in fact just retrobait stuffed with nostalgic references for algorithms to easily recommend.[30] Retrobait artists tailor-made for Spotify algorithms litter playlists and accrue massive numbers of streams. Listening to them, music critic Jeremy Larson writes, provides "the cheapest high in music," noting that streambait artists like Michigan rock band (and Led Zeppelin derivative) Greta Van Fleet don't have to "capture the past" perfectly, they just "[need] to come close enough so that a computer can assign [them] to [their] definite article."[31]

Retrobait can even trigger nostalgia through Easter egg marketing, a tactic where advertisers hide references within media for astute viewers to find. Easter eggs are hidden in everything from video games to Google Doodles. Films like *Ralph Breaks the Internet* and *Ready Player One* contain loads of Easter eggs alluding to the pop culture of the past and present. Easter egg marketing has proven to be an effective strategy to hold our attention, mainly because the clues refer to older media. Carefully placing Easter eggs is now standard practice for corporations, as they know so many today thirst for a steady drip of nostalgia. But the practice hides more than just nostalgic references in artistic works. It also hides the marketing tactics of corporations, as people are too distracted hunting the eggs to realize they're being marketed to. Media conglomerates like Disney or Warner Bros. can promote the films and franchises of their assets by shrinking them down to Easter eggs and scattering them in their content. What feels like a fun bit of nostalgic fan service, where all your favorite characters get to interact in one movie, is really just a media monopoly flexing its holdings.

During Super Bowl LIV, the world's major multinationals delivered commercials strewn with Easter eggs. Walmart ran its "Famous Visitors" ad, in which numerous characters from pop culture's greatest science-fiction hits converged upon a Walmart store to pick up groceries. Buzz Lightyear, the Martians from *Mars Attacks!*, aliens from the *Men in Black* franchise, and others make appearances. (The ad resembled a previous Walmart commercial that aired during the 76th Golden Globe Awards. It follows the same formula, as The Mystery Machine, the Ecto-1, Fred Flintstone's foot-operated car, and other famous automobiles from retro pop culture stop by Walmart to take advantage of free grocery pickup.) There was also the Molly Ringwald cameo in the Avocados from Mexico ad and the strange Tracee Ellis Ross/Bryan Cranston/Mountain Dew/*The Shining* mashup.

Super Bowl commercials have always been celebrity vehicles and displays of corporate synergy, but Super Bowl LIV's were weird in a specific way: *they did not seem to be of human origin*. It was as if the corporations behind them ran models to determine which pop cultural references would hold our attention the longest and then created ads according to the data. Watching them, I felt myself hunting for the Easter eggs, unable to look away. At the watch party I attended, some of the other guests were calling out the references, as if it were a game. Nobody mentioned wanting to try out Walmart's pickup service after seeing the ad, because that wasn't the product being sold — we were.

Data collection is especially crucial for streaming companies to determine what to recommend to users next, and they use algorithms to do this. At first blush it seems that algorithms are far better than humans at recommending new things, but they only really recommend things that match our taste profiles. Oftentimes what gets recommended is more retrobait, which creates a feedback loop. The information we feed into a streaming platform is catalogued and compared to other profiles in the

system, a process known as collaborative filtering. Titles are recommended based on both a user's taste profile and the profiles of others who consume similar content. Users then provide feedback in the form of clicks, and filtering algorithms adjust their recommendations accordingly. Philosopher of science Catherine Stinson describes it like this:

> The sequence of events is a loop starting with a recommendation step based on the initial model, then the user is presented with the recommendations, and chooses some items to interact with. These interactions provide explicit or implicit feedback in the form of labels, which are used to update the model. Then the loop repeats with recommendations based on the updated model.[32]

The result is that we keep bingeing the same content, much of it retrobait, because it keeps getting recommended to us. As this feedback loop continues, no new information is added; the algorithm always recommends content that affirms your taste. The platform flashes a mirror before you, which is merely a reflection of someone else.

The problem with retrobait isn't only that it hooks people and locks them into feedback loops. It's also that it tends to privilege specific understandings of the past, while downplaying, or outright obscuring, others. Take Ancestry, for example. Learning about one's ancestry can be quite rewarding, particularly if you're white. But if you're not, you may find Ancestry's retrobaiting tactics frustrating, even offensive. "In attempting to market genealogy as nostalgia, Ancestry.com has at times been insensitive to… traumatic history," Kristen Green wrote in *The Washington Post*, referring to a controversial ad by Ancestry depicting "a young white man in 19th-century clothing holding out a ring to a black woman." The white man begs her to escape north with him, where, the ad implies, they will eventually be married in Canada. The ad presents a simplistic, and utterly ahistorical, account of the actual past, but its

romanticized portrait of slavery might appeal to white Ancestry customers who believe in such fantasies. While whites might be able to easily trace their ancestry on the site, Green points out that when Blacks do it, they often encounter a "brick wall — a dearth of records before emancipation." Behind this brick wall are truths too horrible for Ancestry's nostalgic ad: routine rape by white masters, downriver slave trade, forced family separations. Green also discovered that Ancestry "does not appear to have a mechanism to account for slave rape," after the site questioned her addition of a thirteen-year-old enslaved mother to a family tree she had built. The site's LifeStory function weaves ancestors into history by proposing some of the major events of the time they might have participated in. But when it suggested to Green that an enslaved girl in New Orleans might have gone to Mardi Gras, it did so assuming she was white and free. "The way [Ancestry] currently presents context on black lives does a terrible disservice to African Americans looking for information about their past," she wrote, recommending that "the company should stop interpreting its own records for users."[33]

Nostalgia is a potent emotion for genealogy sites because, like data, one's genes are often seen as the key to one's past and future. The idea is that, with enough genetic data, perhaps we can reveal some truth about the past, or maybe even establish a bond with it. There have been attempts to sequence the genome of Richard III to determine whether he was predisposed to heart disease or, perhaps, despotic tendencies.[34] You can go back thousands of years with MyTrueAncestry, which compares your DNA with samples of ancient DNA to triangulate your "true" origin. Or, if you're a lonely American, you can register with 23andMe to feel some sort of connection to heritage in an "isolated anti-culture" like the US, where "[c]ommunity, and a sense of belonging, are still hard to find," as Nicole Karlis has written.[35]

Retrobait's attempts to highlight marginalized histories are often ham-fisted, even offensive, like Ancestry's slavery ad. But the purpose of retrobait isn't to capture our attention so that we can learn about the past; it's to scrape data from users. We're told this data is collected in an attempt to predict what we want, but this isn't quite true. Data is used to determine what will go viral, and like a popular song or meme, certain pasts, and our nostalgia for them, can go viral too.

If You Like Nostalgia, You'll Love This

If algorithms are biased, then perhaps we can code the bias away with "clean data and good intentions." Not so, according to Catherine Stinson. In an article on machine learning bias, she argues that algorithms themselves are biased towards popularizing and homogenizing trends, which "have the effect of further marginalizing the already marginal." Recommender algorithms tend to suggest things we already like, foreclosing the possibility that we might be exposed to something we've never experienced before. This can trap consumers in a loop, according to Stinson. "[T]he user may not want to get stuck in a rut of only watching teen comedies after one nostalgic viewing of *Mean Girls*, even if they do also like *Clueless*, and *Election*," she writes.[36] If collaborative filtering algorithms are recommending nostalgia to us whether we like it or not, then they're likely also recommending it to others as well, leading to a general decrease in the diversity of recommended items over time.

This decrease, Stinson explains, is due to the increased availability of content in the digital age. She cites a 2008 study that found that "since online journals became common… citation practices have narrowed." In the days before online searching, she argues, one had to "brows[e] library stacks, where it takes longer to find specific sources, but you end up seeing a greater variety of papers in passing." But in the age of Google Scholar,

fewer articles are being read, even though our access to them has expanded. It's a process that mirrors the echo-chambering of users on social media. "It may not be that users fail to venture outside their bubbles," Stinson writes, "but rather that the algorithm traps users inside."[37]

Stinson notes that algorithmic bias will continue to disproportionately affect minority communities, as everything from identity verification to criminal sentencing is outsourced to, or at least influenced by, algorithms. In January 2020, facial recognition algorithms wrongly identified Robert Julian-Borchak Williams, which led to his arrest and thirty hours in police custody for a robbery he did not commit. "You think all Black men look alike?" Williams asked police when they showed him a surveillance photo of the suspect. "I guess the computer got it wrong," a detective told him.[38]

In 2013, a Wisconsin man by the name of Eric Loomis was arrested for fleeing a police officer. A judge sentenced him to six years in prison by consulting a computer program called Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions, or COMPAS. COMPAS assigned Eric a rating score based on his risk of recidivism, using historical data related to education level, job status, and his relationship to drug users. Developed by Equivant, a company specializing in "software for justice," the COMPAS algorithm has been criticized for unreliably predicting recidivism and for disproportionately forecasting Blacks to commit crime more often than whites.[39] But even though the algorithm has come under fire, no one really knows how it works. It's hidden inside a black box of proprietary software, so we can't be sure how it specifically calculates risk. For this reason, Eric appealed to the Wisconsin Supreme Court, arguing that, since no one could examine the algorithm, the judge had violated due process. He lost the case, and the decision was upheld. He then appealed to the Supreme Court of the United States, but the court denied reviewing it.

One of the reasons why the Wisconsin Supreme Court didn't overturn the decision was because, as Chief Justice Patience Roggensack wrote,

judges can’t rely solely on COMPAS to make their decisions. They can consider it, but they can’t outsource the decision-making process to an algorithm, full stop. Writing about the case in 2017, attorney Joe Forward questioned this argument: “[W]hat is the line between consideration and reliance? And what happens when these tools get better? What happens… if some company develops an algorithm that purports to make accurate sentencing decisions in place of a judge?”[40]

Algorithms don’t just marginalize people in the present, they also marginalize those parts of history that might knock us out of an unproductive nostalgic spiral. We live in a world in which things seem to repeat because decision-making is being outsourced to algorithms that rely on past data to predict the future. But predictive algorithms don’t really predict anything, they just make certain pasts repeatedly go viral. Viral pasts recommended by algorithms aren’t always the ones that speak truth to power. They’re very often the official histories, written by dominant elites, that smooth away uncomfortable realities, like the reality of chattel slavery glossed over in the Ancestry ad. They’re also the pasts conjured up nostalgically by political and corporate power to control the behaviors of large groups of people. They invoke the white picket fence and the white nuclear family — the way we never were, as Stephanie Coontz reminds us. Viral pasts show up in retrobait all the time because they pander to believers in the myth of progress, who romanticize the past and regard it as more simplistic than the present, perhaps more carefree. But a viral past is quite often an automated nostalgia trap: a familiar, enjoyable past that amplifies our longing every time it’s recommended, every time it goes viral. With time, the public might grow intolerant of unfamiliar pasts, as our nostalgic biases cultivated by repeated retrobait recommendations predispose us to like only that which is familiar.

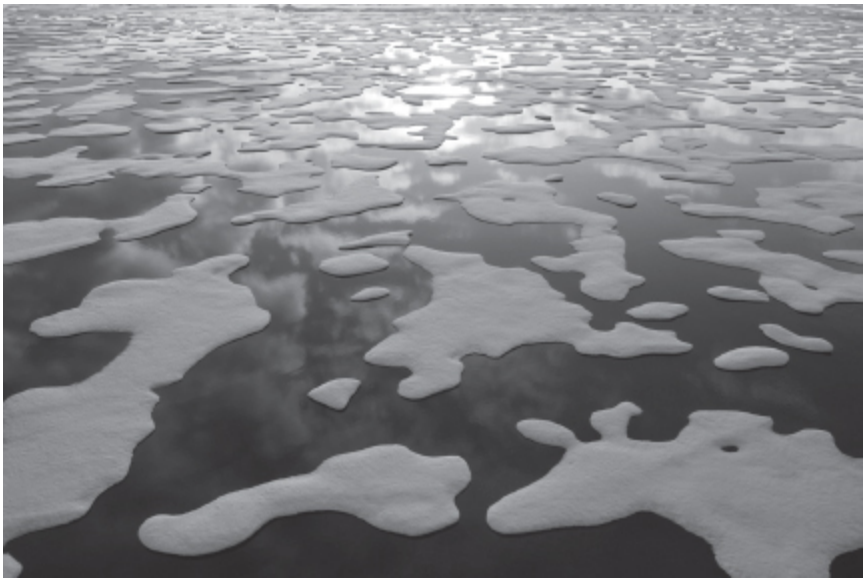
We rely on past data to make assumptions, learn about the future, and anticipate what’s coming. This is part of our perception process as thinking,

feeling humans. But, as humans, we operate quite differently than an algorithm, which is “stuck in time” and cannot evolve like human decision-making can.[41] And since the corporations that rely on rigid algorithms to make decisions are more interested in profit than fairness, their models of the future run the risk of unfairly perpetuating exploitative status quos that prioritize the free market, not people. To fix this problem, we either have to rethink our dependence on biased algorithms, which often rely on “birds-of-a-feather connections” to make predictions, or throw them out. “If we’re going to be equal before the law, or be treated equally as voters, we cannot stand for systems that drop us into different castes and treat us differently,” writes Cathy O’Neil.[42]

Not everyone who looks back even sees a past. Sometimes you have to invent one that isn’t colored by numbers. Some people yearn for a past that can’t be quantified, for the data of the past is often violent and imperial — a “colonial mathematics,” as historian Theodora Dryer writes.[43] They are the numbers of historical racism and intolerance. Data reveals places where crime will likely happen, because it’s happened there before, or which products will probably sell, because they’ve sold before. “To train these nascent intelligences on the remnants of prior knowledge is thus to encode… barbarism into our future,” James Bridle argues.[44] At scale, algorithmic determinism locks people and events in repeating loops, a homogenizing process that mirrors the larger homogenization of society itself: the flattening of unique places into anonymous non-places and the consolidation of media corporations.

When social relations are weakened, due to pandemic or precarity, algorithms punch a hole in the present for the past to cross over. Those who worship the almighty power of digital technology are often shocked when algorithms fail them. To them, an algorithm is the very evidence we are living in the future, on track to a utopia where people can sit back and let the bots run things for us. But algorithms cancel the future and trap us in a

vicious cycle. As human labor is augmented, or replaced outright, by bots, society will likely become more precarious, and old prejudices will percolate into the present. Those who are nostalgic for being human in a time when they’re replaced, or treated like data themselves, must organize against the algorithms.



Chapter 9
Grief and Yearning in the Anthropocene

Earth is heating up quickly. For thousands of years, the planet's temperature hasn't changed that much, but it's currently warming at an alarming rate. By the end of the twenty-first century, millions won't be able to go outside because it will simply be too hot. Many coastal regions across the world will eventually be underwater, including parts of Vietnam, Iraq, China, and the United States. Desertification will leave parts of Africa unlivable. We're facing an ecological reality in which nearly one-fifth of all land will be too inhospitable to support human life. Some will try to live in these hot zones while others flee. The great climate migration will create numerous problems over the next one hundred years, but we can't afford to wait to address them, because the migrations have already started. From Africa, southeast Asia, across the Middle East, out of Central America, and beyond, people are on the move. They're moving into Europe and North America, driven by multiple factors: crop loss, economic collapse, conflict, and climate.[1]

Migrants carry their memories with them as a kind of protection against homesickness, especially when things get stressful in their new home. A country that accepts migrants must also accept their memories, and although they will inevitably feel nostalgic in a new place, migrants will feel much worse if a country doesn't want them. We are already witnessing

a battle between those places that welcome migrants and those that don't. The latter draw on nativist rhetoric to seduce their people into believing that migrants steal jobs, change culture for the worse, and spread crime, all unfounded lies fueled by xenophobia. This only exacerbates the nostalgic migrants who might not be able to return home because it's underwater, or because it's a desert, or because it's a coal mine.

Not everyone can flee a changing environment, though. For a variety of reasons, including but not limited to socioeconomic status, family obligations, employment, and physical ability, some have to remain in place and watch with dread as their homes are changed by weather or industrial invasion.

Philosopher Glenn Albrecht studied the emotional responses of the Indigenous people of the Upper Hunter Valley in New South Wales, as mining companies set up vast open-cast mines in their region, transforming their local farming economy into one "inextricably chained to coal."[2] The people grew slowly depressed, witnessing their land change so drastically, seeing huge pits in the earth, hearing massive trucks rumbling outside daily. What Albrecht heard from the Hunter Valley people sounded a lot like nostalgia, but no one had left home. And no one yearned for a different time. They longed instead for their home as it was, while they were still at home.

Albrecht called this emotional state solastalgia, "the pain or distress caused by the ongoing loss of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory."[3] Solastalgia is the "homesickness you have at home," the deep mourning associated with watching your home grow uncannier over time. Albrecht regarded solastalgia as a response particular to those affected by changing ecological conditions brought on by human-caused global warming. But he scaled the term to apply also to those subject to "war, terrorism, land clearing, mining, rapid institutional change and the gentrification of older parts of cities" —

anywhere people “direct[ly] experience… transformation or destruction of the physical environment (home) by forces that undermine a personal and community sense of identity and control.”[4] Seen in this way, it is an emotion particular to the Anthropocene, a new strain of nostalgia for those who aren’t mobile.[5]

Cases of solastalgia have been noted across the world. Drought-stricken Ghanaians have felt it. Residents of the Comox Valley in British Columbia feel it as they witness the mighty Comox Glacier melt away before their eyes. The glacier sits on a range high above the town for all to see, but what the townspeople see is its slow disappearance.[6] New Orleans residents felt solastalgic after Hurricane Katrina; those who stayed behind saw the uncanniness unfold in real time, while the ones who fled were shocked with sudden nostalgia upon return. Appalachians have felt it for years as mountain-top removal lays waste to their region.[7] Californians have felt it in response to megafires that scorch the earth and redden the sky.[8] And it’s possible that other animals feel it, too.

For humans, solastalgia isn’t just a response to the uncanny effects of global warming. It’s also felt by people who can’t uproot and move but who feel the steady pressure to do so by invasive fossil fuel companies. The ones who stay behind in these regions must live alongside the noise and unsightliness of a coal mine or oil derricks, and if they can eventually move, it’s often too late. “Property values plummet as [a] mine expands,” Albrecht explains, “so those who hold out the longest have the most to lose.”[9] What’s more, native residents are outpriced by the company newcomers, who often make more money in the lucrative fossil fuel industry.[10] With neighbors and friends fleeing, strange corporate faces in town, higher prices, and a ravaged landscape, it’s no wonder that the ones who can’t leave their homes are solastalgic. But those who *can* aren’t much better. Forced to move, their plight is old-fashioned nostalgia.

Nostalgia after the End of the World

Nostalgia is one of the emotional responses to grief, the intense, long-lasting sadness we feel after a major loss. Grieving is a painful process; mourners must learn to live without the person or thing that was lost, and this can take time. To balance the pain they may turn to nostalgic reveries, not just to escape, but also to reflect on happier times and share stories of the past with others. One of the hardest parts of grieving is learning how to talk about the ones we've lost in the past tense, but telling pleasant stories of the past is one way we can do this. In fact, we need the steady crutch of the past to lean on during grief. The aftermath of loss isn't always the right time to embrace novel ideas. Once we get used to thinking of our lost ones in the past tense, we can then begin the process of moving out of our grief and into the future.

But what happens if we can't move on? Or what if there was no punctuated moment of loss, or one thing or person that was lost, but instead a constant, creeping feeling that *all is lost*? What if the air hangs heavy with loss all the time?

It feels as though we are grieving the loss of the planet, standing by and watching it die before our eyes. Many are already mourning the end of the world, and it hasn't even happened yet. This unceasing grief, made worse by the sundry disasters of the present century, yields unceasing nostalgia.

Grief has long been an emotional ingredient in environmentalism.[11] So has nostalgia, which, more often than not, connotes "back to the land" movements, dominated by misty-eyed hippies who just want to escape civilization and live in the wilderness. Or it might conjure the figure of Ted Kaczynski, who snapped and started mailing bombs to technocratic university professors after his favorite natural oasis was destroyed by real estate developers. But green nostalgia is more than just the emotion of hippies and unhinged extremists. It's also driven by "the sense that in

industrialised, bureaucratic and fragmented societies humans have become increasingly alienated from themselves, from each other and from nature," as Alastair Bonnett writes.[12] Rather than a suspicious delusion, green nostalgia is entirely justified, as so many around the world bear witness to the unprecedented destruction of the planet and yearn to save it. "[W]hat has happened to the environment over the past two centuries and, even more pressingly, in our own lifetimes, is anything but normal," Bonnett writes. "It is extraordinary."[13]

With this comes an extraordinary grief and a longing to re-suture humans and the rest of the natural world. Bonnett points out that by the early twentieth century, "the preservation of the countryside emerged as a familiar aspect of social debate," as people began noticing industrialization changing the landscape around them. These conversations around disappearing land eventually led to the creation of national parks, a conservation method driven by a nostalgia for an unsullied countryside and a hope to protect the future from further land loss.[14] Certainly, the environmental tradition can spur tearful back-to-landers to escape into the forest, or chain themselves to a tree. But these aren't the only action tendencies green nostalgia has. A longing for nature today isn't necessarily going to shackle us to an Edenic past, when Earth was clean and green, but, rather, is "helping drive forward environmental concern and create hope for the future."[15]

And green nostalgia is, in many ways, a better response to global warming today than others, including two of the most popular: denialism and nihilism. Unlike nostalgic environmentalists, who very much recognize the problem of global warming, denialists shoo it away. This is the perspective of the climate deniers, reactionary thinkers who believe global warming is a hoax concocted by radical leftists bent on overthrowing capitalism and all its supposed freedoms. They include prominent conservatives, scientists paid off by oil companies, and of course the fossil

fuel companies themselves (and anyone else who profits from the extraction economy). But the denialists also include those who believe in climate warming but see it as a problem of individual willpower, that we must each "do our part" to save the environment. An especially gross example of this is "Earth," the song by comedian-rapper Lil Dicky, which, despite its reductionist political message that people need to "just chill" and "respect what we built," features a cast of celebrities who frankly ought to know better.[16] Somewhere in between are the denialists who believe in climate warming but try to logically argue their way out of "environmental alarmism" because they think climate warming isn't as bad as people make it out to be. They refuse to see a warming climate as the end of the world. To them, alarmism is just a new religion that needs to be debunked with hard science and "the facts."[17]

Then there are the climate nihilists, who adopt a sort of "give up, we're doomed" mentality popular among those who enjoy reveling in the poetry of despair. The nihilists call out the denialists for pretending the problem isn't that bad, but they take an extra step by declaring that it's too late for us all, that there is no hope, and we should just stop pretending. A notable climate nihilist is novelist Jonathan Franzen, who has written that fighting to stop climate warming is useless and that organized groups are kidding themselves if they think they can do anything to mitigate environmental collapse.[18] He's not alone. Writer Roy Scranton has often waxed poetic about the futility of fighting against the fossil fuel companies. In *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, Scranton writes, "No matter how many people take to the streets in massive marches or in targeted direct actions, they cannot put their hands on the real flows of power, because they do not help produce it. They only consume."[19] He ultimately contends that the problem isn't runaway capitalism — "the problem is us."[20]

Climate nihilism is often the position of the person who thinks global warming is broadly a human problem, when the evidence of recent history

indicates it’s a problem made much worse by just a few humans. The richest 10% of the world’s population is responsible for over half of all carbon emissions between 1990 and 2015, according to a 2020 report by Oxfam. The super-rich, the so-called 1%, have emitted more carbon than the poorer half of the world’s population. Sixty-three million people have out-polluted over three billion.[21] Humans may have been skilled at wiping out species from day one, but rich humans are professionals at destroying the planet.

Climate denialists and nihilists both frame the problems of global warming as action-less. Whether they believe global warming is real or a hoax, both groups think *there is nothing to be done*. The problem is either unfixable, unserious, over-exaggerated, or fake. As it stands, climate denialism is quite popular among conservatives, but as more of them come to see global warming as a business opportunity, they may eventually switch sides and appropriate climate nihilism. Brace for impact, they might say, and accept these strict measures — after all, we’re doomed! They might tell us to trust the strongmen to get us through the rough ride to the future. These reactionaries won’t use the rhetoric of collective action, Indigenous rights, reparations, or New Deal-era social programs. They’ll instead speak the language of austerity.

It’s relatively easy to adopt a nihilist position in the face of startling evidence. Climate disruption is now locked into place. There is no turning back. The present cannot be measured but by looking into the future and seeing what new, weird climatic events will come. And there are plenty of weird happenings already.[22] In the US, freak hurricanes batter the East Coast, and wildfires engulf the West Coast. Monsoons in India are growing increasingly lethal. Gigantic wasp colonies, known as “super nests,” have been spotted in Alabama as big as a car.[23] There will be more encounters with strange insects, such as the Asian giant hornet, nicknamed the “murder hornet,” and disease-carrying ticks. And it is likely that the next decades

will be marked by sudden zoonotic pandemics that will threaten an unprepared globalized world. These are merely a few of the disasters we face today. Who knows what else the future holds.

The fact that things will still get worse even if action is taken isn't justification to *not act*. Sea levels will rise, heat waves will spread, and many people will be displaced even as societies divest from fossil fuels. But things will be unimaginable if we do nothing.

It's difficult to sway the climate nihilists. They have adopted the doomed position, and rousing them to fight means convincing them something can be done. Caught in the crack between solving global warming totally and not at all, they side with the latter. But denialists are different. Some of them have not chosen to give up yet, and some ignore the truth completely, perhaps because their financial interests preclude them from believing the science in the first place. Others fail to see the scope of the problem, like the celebrity deniers with their campfire songs. But one way to turn a denialist into a believer is by inducing nostalgia.

Researchers at the University of Cologne found that conservatives tend to respond better to climate warming information if it's couched in nostalgic terms. Framing climate warming as a problem with future implications doesn't normally work with the right, who tend to regard the past as better than the present. After all, conservative politicians often induce nostalgia to win votes, and their constituencies give their support. To convince conservative deniers of the threat of global warming, according to the researchers, we should use past framing, shifting the focus from "things will get worse in the future" to "things have gotten worse since the past." This change in focus could bridge the gap between conservatives who don't believe climate warming to be much of a threat and those who do.[24] However, the split between liberals and conservatives isn't so clean when one considers their positions on climate change. The problem isn't that conservatives are hardwired for nostalgia, it's that many prominent

conservative leaders across the world know that capitalism only survives by projecting the past into the future. The precious data of the past provides the instructions for future growth and profit, while foreclosing future economic alternatives. Any good capitalist knows that nostalgia for early capitalism helps create the conditions for late capitalism. Furthermore, reactionaries will always prefer the past because they see it as an Edenic time before the rise of identity politics, social movements, and civil rights. And these reactionary tendencies aren't limited to so-called conservatives. For years, liberals and conservatives alike have equivocated on climate issues, and many on both sides continue to support the fossil fuel industry.

It isn't that nostalgia will *always* appeal to conservatives. Sometimes it does, and sometimes it doesn't. The US legislation known as the Green New Deal is a nostalgic appeal, its name an appropriation of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal reforms. Its writers and supporters are nostalgic for mid-twentieth-century public works projects, and they hope to update them for a twenty-first-century economy. Even though it appeals to nostalgia, several prominent conservatives (and liberals, too) have openly opposed it, calling it a "Trojan horse for socialism" and invoking the bogeyman of left-wing extremism.[25] The nostalgic appeal hasn't worked, not because nostalgia is ineffective at spurring social change, but because those with differing views are nostalgic for different pasts. Many people today, including elected leaders, are looking backwards, but they're yearning for different histories.

Ice and Oil

In 2003, a series of rockfalls rolled down the Matterhorn, trapping seventy mountaineers. The rescue mission was one of the biggest in the history of mountain climbing.[26] Three years later, two German tourists were driving down the A2 motorway, approaching the Gotthard Tunnel, when a boulder

fell from above and smashed their car, killing them instantly.[27] And since 2007, the Mont Blanc massif in the Alps has suffered hundreds of rockfalls, rendering many climbing paths too dangerous.[28] Warmed by the rise of global temperatures, the permafrost gluing the Alps together is melting, loosening rock to rain down onto climbers and passersby below. Known as the "'water tower' of Europe," the Alps provide a steady stream of water to rivers and communities, but the snowpack is melting too quickly, causing more heat to be absorbed by the exposed mountain, melting the snow even faster.[29] Alpine snow seasons have been shortening since the 1960s, and each year high winter temperatures shatter records. By 2100, the Alpine snowpack will likely be gone.[30]

If you want to see the future, look at the mountains. According to the 2019 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, "Mountain surface air temperature observations in Western North America, European Alps and High Mountain Asia show warming over recent decades at an average rate of 0.3ºC per decade, with a likely range of ± 0.2ºC, thereby outpacing the global warming rate."[31] Mountains across the planet are warming more quickly than the rest of the world, and the effects will not only be dangerous for climbers, but for the rest of us too. And the faster they melt, the harder it is for researchers to study the processes that led to their melting. That's because if you want to see the past, you have to look at what the mountains are losing: ice.

Earth's memory is stored in ice. Drill down far enough into a glacier and you will see the world as it was. Scientists can study the history of climate by analyzing ice cores, cylinders drilled from ice, but melting glaciers have turned studying the past into a race against time. Glaciologists consider glaciers to be the "endangered archives" of Earth's memory; once they're gone, a chunk of history will go too. This looming crisis led several European glaciologists to start Ice Memory, an initiative to collect ice samples and study climate history before it's too late.[32] Without these

archives, future scientists will be less knowledgeable about global warming and less equipped to know what to do to curb it. When ice disappears, so does information about past climates, species, warming, cooling — it all melts away. Ice provides us with pre-human records of the Earth, and without it there is no way to have a robust picture of geologic time. “As the past melts into the permafrost,” James Bridle points out, “so is the future rocked by the atmosphere. The changing climate shakes not merely our expectations, but our ability to predict any future at all.”[33] Once again, the future depends on understanding the past.

In 2008, in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in northeastern Alaska, a team of researchers drilled an ice core the length of one and a half football fields from the McCall Glacier.[34] The ANWR is a haven for countless species and provides opportunities for scientists to study the past. But it’s also a final frontier of sorts for oil companies. The battle over drilling rights in the ANWR has raged for decades, as environmentalists understand the grave implications of oil drilling in a wildlife refuge that protects native species. Not to mention the area is home to the Gwich’in people, who rely on the caribou that would likely disappear with oil drilling.[35] There have been efforts to open the ANWR for extraction, even oil lease sales, but thanks to public outcry, the million acres of the refuge with the highest oil potential have not yet been invaded by major fossil fuel companies. If that day comes, we won’t only lose species; we’ll also lose some of Earth’s memory.

If ice is the Earth’s memory, then oil is its data. James Bridle has made this connection, arguing that oil and data are “historically imperialist and colonialist, and tightly tied to capitalist networks of exploitation.”[36] Both data and oil, he writes, are “forcibly extracted” and manipulated to retain imperial interests.[37] The more that “[d]ata-driven regimes” rely on fossil fuels, the more that Earth’s memory, ice, will melt away, replaced with an oppressive code that sustains capitalism: data.[38]

The claim that “data is the new oil” is an apt metaphor, but not for the reasons you may think, as Sy Taffel has argued. “[D]ata doesn’t simply exist out there waiting to be captured,” Taffel says, “but is something that has to be actively produced through materially intensive extractive processes,” just like oil. And yet, the metaphor is often thrown around by elite technocrats who think of data as immaterial and, therefore, cleaner than oil (but no less profitable). They regard oil as messy and unsustainable, whereas data is smarter, more sustainable, and weightless. Oil is the past; data, the future. But this isn’t the case. Like oil extraction, data extraction also relies on energy-intensive labor processes, from the mining of conflict minerals used in our data-extracting digital devices, to the mining of cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin, itself “a process that currently uses a similar amount of electricity as Algeria.”[39]

There is quite a lot of nostalgia going around for the good old days of the American oil industry, when extraction was hard work, when you got your hands dirty. Donald Trump’s “energy nostalgia” influenced much of his rhetoric as president, although he wasn’t the first to be unashamedly pro-carbon. Michael Klare called Trump’s energy plan a “nostalgic compulsion aimed at restoring a long-vanished America in which coal plants, steel mills and gas-guzzling automobiles were the designated indicators of progress, while concern over pollution — let alone climate change — was yet to be an issue.” When Trump was a young man in the 1950s, the ideology of expansionism and a deregulated industrial sector accelerated American growth. Later, as president, he joined the lineage of insecure leaders who induced nostalgia for that time period, when America was supposedly stronger and less impotent.[40] But behind this nostalgic rhetoric for oil are lobby groups and fossil fuel magnates who financially benefit from it. Fossil fuel reliance is not an issue of nostalgia, purely. There are interests at stake.

Drilling for oil is an act of bringing to the surface what is deeply buried in the past. In the eyes of Big Oil, people and other animals are simply in the way. Like data, fossil fuels must be produced through intensive practices that wreck the environment and advantage only the economic elites. Fossil fuels foreclose the future, because there won't be much of a future left if we continue burning them. Divestment means acknowledging that some things don't need to be violently dug up.

Against Energy Nostalgia

Skiers visiting the slopes of the Dolomites are often stunned to find largely snowless hills dotted with thousands of snowmaking machines scattering artificial snow. Without fake snow, the Alpine skiing industry would have already collapsed, and in the future, as more of the snowpack melts, skiers may find themselves gliding down artificial snow only.[41] Snowmaking might sustain the ski business, but it won't replace actual snow. Once the snowpack is gone, it won't come back.

Now that climate feedback loops are locked in, the planet will warm at a stunningly quick rate. The greenhouse gases emitted in the past will keep coming back, cycling over in these loops, gaining strength with every revolution. The present fight to keep the planet from warming is essentially a fight against our own industrialized past, which comes back more powerful and horrifying with every freak climatic event.

Energy nostalgia, the yearning for the days before we woke up to climate warming's alarms, is nothing more than nostalgia for the time in which climate feedback loops started cycling. We can look back and study how the feedback loops ramped up, but we cannot go back there. We can't wind back the clock to the days when fossil fuel conglomerates split open the earth without a climate care in the world. The ones who desire a return to the industrial might of the mid-twentieth century are old-fashioned

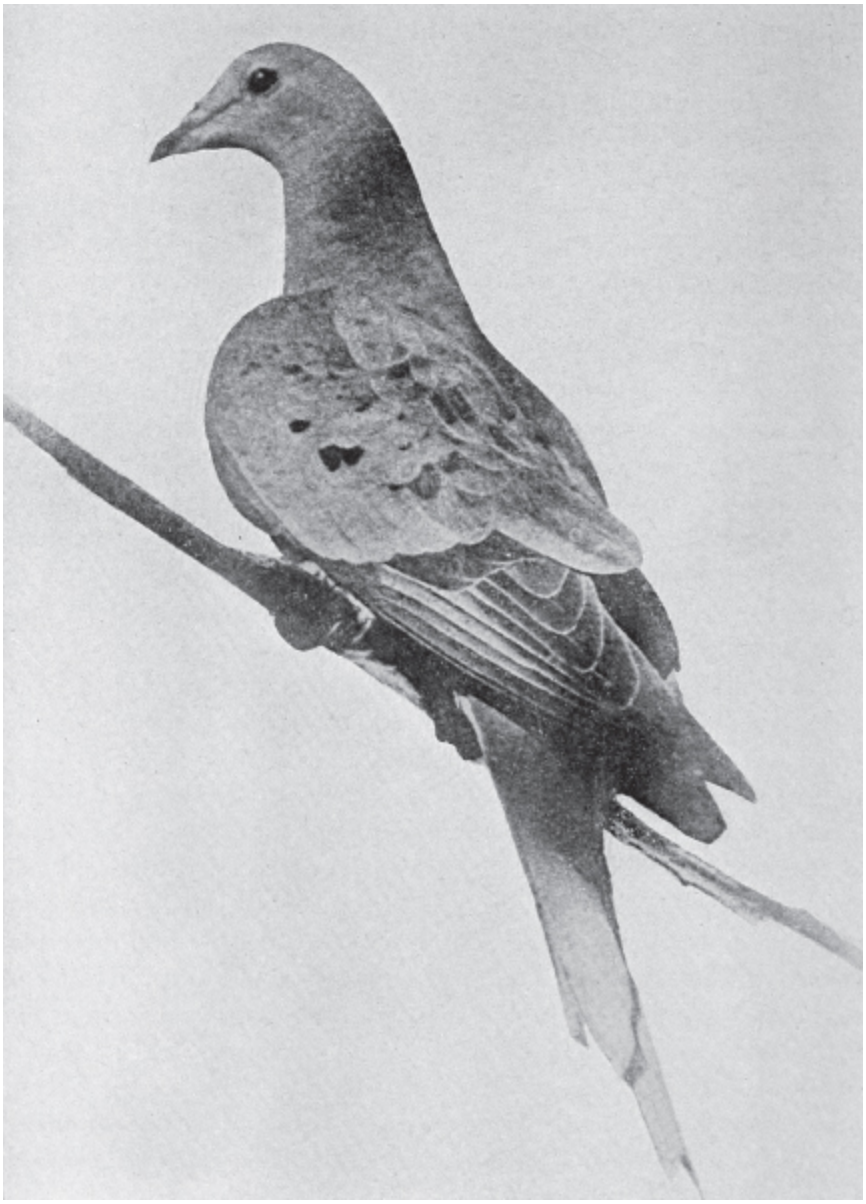
denialists. Their nostalgia will end them — and maybe the rest of us too. The others who throw up their hands in surrender, who see energy nostalgia for the lie that it is but who wallow in despair, are also on the wrong track. “Nihilism is always number one in the charts these days,” Timothy Morton writes. But even though it’s popular, this attitude will get nothing done in the long run.[42]

When it comes to climate catastrophe, is nostalgia really that useful? Actually, it is. We don’t feel nostalgia just to escape grief but also to cope with traumatic memories of events that caused the grief in the first place. When people started posting nostalgic videos reminiscing on the first COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, there was swift backlash: why would anyone romanticize the quarantine, isolation, and fear of a deadly viral pandemic? Not everyone can so easily reflect on that time with misty-eyed fondness, especially the ones who lost family members. But for some, the only way to really make sense of that awful period is to cast a warm, nostalgic glow on it, or else they might not be able to move on. Ironically, it is nostalgia that can sometimes free a grieving person from the past, instead of trapping them forever in it.

To cope with the grief of climate catastrophe, nostalgia is one of several emotions, including anger and hope, that should comprise our emotional toolkit. But as always, our success with it depends on how we use it. We must not yearn for the periods of unregulated extraction and production, when the limitless worldview of capitalism tricked the public into believing progress would bend upwards forever. We can, however, look to the strong unions and general strikes of the past and learn from them. Nostalgia will be a crucial emotional component in the “process of rebuilding and reinventing the very idea of the collective, the communal, the commons, the civil, and the civic after so many decades of attack and neglect,” as Naomi Klein puts it. Klein makes the case that applying lessons from the collective movements of history are necessary to survive the “hot and stormy

future.”[43] These movements — the abolitionists, the Freedom Riders, the supporters of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge — “dreamed in public” and were “unafraid of the language of morality.”[44] They fought for what was right. In no way should we pine for the inhuman conditions that forced these movements to demonstrate, but we can long for their public dreaming, for the collective feeling that anything is possible when we dare to invest emotionally in the future.

We’re not going to weather the climate catastrophe by only throwing data at it. Data can help us get a clearer picture of just how destructive fossil fuels are, and to reveal the steps we must take to divest from them. But the sheer application of data isn’t enough to face the grave reality of climate warming. After all, geoengineers can apply data all day long in a fool’s attempt to control the weather. This might seem like a progressive measure, but it is ultimately in step with the industrial dreams of human dominance over the environment. Without an emotion like nostalgia — nostalgia for sustainability, for the planet, for other species — the future will be hot and angry.



Chapter 10
Memories of Extinction

Once there were birds in the North American sky — billions and billions of birds, more than could ever be counted. The most numerous were passenger pigeons. If you had lived at the beginning of the nineteenth century, you could have witnessed their flocks blocking out the sun. When they passed overhead, it sounded like thunder. Houses shook, and darkness fell. A flapping black cloud of pigeons looked biblical, as if a forgotten plague had suddenly descended, or perhaps demonic, prompting one Montreal bishop in 1687 to consider performing an exorcism on the birds.[1] Their nesting areas were enormous, with millions of pigeons covering hundreds of square miles.[2] They were also sociable birds that lived an itinerant existence, flying almost constantly in search of food. At their most abundant, there were more passenger pigeons than any other bird in North America. Estimations range in the billions. They were a memorable force of nature, leaving their mark wherever they flew, until their sudden and shocking disappearance.

In the fall of 1813, John James Audubon stopped en route to Louisville when he noticed a massive flock of passenger pigeons roaring overhead. The famed ornithologist was amazed. “The air was literally filled with Pigeons; the light of noon-day was obscured as by an eclipse,” he wrote. While staying in Louisville, Audubon observed a steady stream of pigeons flying overhead for three days straight, surely an incredible sight. He also took note of the crowds that had gathered on the bank of the Ohio River.

Men and boys alike, their rifles raised to the sky, were shooting into the passing cloud of pigeons. “Multitudes were thus destroyed,” Audubon wrote. “For a week or more, the population fed on no other flesh than that of Pigeons.”[3]

The last passenger pigeon was Martha, named for Martha Washington, and she died in the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914. But even before her death, ornithologists were stunned that such an abundant species could disappear so quickly. For over a century, scientists have investigated the sudden extinction of the passenger pigeon, looking into every known cause, from reproductive failures to disease. All the while, many suspected the true cause of their disappearance, and over time the evidence became clear that the passenger pigeon was driven to extinction by humans.

To farmers of the time, passenger pigeons were the “perfect scourge” because of their tendency to break tree branches, rain droppings from above, and descend on wheat fields to feed on seed grain.[4] A field visited by passenger pigeons would be snow-white from the sheer amount of droppings left behind. But their extinction was hastened by much more than angry farmers. Although Indigenous tribes hunted them for food, passenger pigeons weren’t truly threatened until the arrival of Europeans to North America. Anglo settlers killed them on a scale never before seen. Eventually, some state legislatures considered condemning the hunting of pigeons, but nothing came to pass.

Several newspapers included illustrations on how to trap and kill as many passenger pigeons as possible. Some professional pigeon hunters, or pigeoners, used decoy birds known as stool pigeons to draw them. They would take a live pigeon, sew its eyelids shut, tie it to a stool, and manipulate its body with string, bouncing the blinded pigeon around so it appeared to be flapping its wings. The bouncing and flapping would trick other pigeons into thinking there was food below, and down they swept, into a massive net.[5]

Infant pigeons, or squabs, were a particular delicacy. To capitalize on the market for squab meat, pigeoners got crafty. They would burn the trunks of trees to force squabs to jump to their death. If a pigeoner wanted to save time, he could simply fire his rifle into a throng of nests in the trees and kill several at once. The systematic destruction of the young occurred at a faster rate than the pigeons could reproduce, ultimately quickening their demise.

Passenger pigeons weren't just hunted for food, though. They were also shot for a "bizarre and brutal form of sport."[6] It was relatively easy for anyone — even bad shots — to kill droves of them simply by shooting randomly into the sky while dense flocks thundered overhead. Shooting competitions were common, with top prizes awarded for killing tens of thousands of pigeons in a single day.[7] Pigeoners were trained to capture the birds live so they could be released at will for controlled trap-shooting competitions. By the end of the nineteenth century these competitions dwindled, simply because there were barely any pigeons left to shoot.[8] It wasn't until the last known passenger pigeon was killed in the wild in 1900 that the Lacey Act was passed, a landmark conservation law that regulates illegal wildlife trade. But by then it was too late for the passenger pigeon.

In 1908, ornithologist Ruthven Deane reluctantly deemed the pigeon extinct, as no flocks or individual birds had been spotted in the wild for over a decade. "Every little while reports appear in the press or sporting papers, that our Wild Pigeon has again been seen," he wrote, "but we have no specimen or facts to verify the record. How many times have I run down some of these reports, only to find them to be cases of either mistaken identity — Turtle Doves — or humbugs." He found it unbelievable that such an abundant species had been so quickly "wiped off the face of the earth through the agency of man, yet when we read the mass of evidence… of the wholesale slaughter which has been going on for so many years, we stop and wonder."[9]

In the early 1900s, efforts were made to describe the pigeon's voice, so that others could listen carefully and perhaps rediscover one in the wild. The passenger pigeon's cry was so distinct that some naturalists hoped they might pick it out among other bird calls. To the trained ear, nothing else sounded like a passenger pigeon, which made their disappearance all the more sorrowful to those who yearned to hear one again. Writing in *The Auk* in 1911, scientist Wallace Craig was despondent: "Its voice was more distinctive than that of any other species… This marked peculiarity… makes it infinitely regrettable if the whole race, through sheer wantonness, has been annihilated."[10] *The Auk* even offered a cash reward of $1000 for the known location of nesting grounds. The reward was only for "information of location of undisturbed nestings." At the bottom of the announcement was a brief proviso: "We do not desire possession of any birds, alive or dead, but are working solely to save the free, Wild Pigeon."[11]

But by then only Martha was left. Visitors made trips to see her at the Cincinnati Zoo until 1914, when she died alone at nearly thirty years old, a sociable animal that once numbered in the billions.

Martha's stuffed body can be seen today at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History. She has represented her species over the years, becoming a kind of celebrity. When she is transported on ice, she flies first class. Folk singer John Herald even wrote an ode to Martha in the 1980s. The song praises her wisdom and proud, majestic air, but Herald sings more about the passersby at the Cincinnati Zoo, either ignoring or weeping at Martha, than he does the brutal devastation of her species.

Martha is supposed to epitomize the entire species, but her woundless corpse doesn't reveal the causes of extinction. Seeing her in perfect stillness, we are blinded to the violence that led to the passenger pigeon's demise. The reality is, not all dead passenger pigeons looked like Martha because they didn't all die in captivity. They were systematically killed off by humans.

Bring Them Back

Over a century after hunting passenger pigeons to extinction, humans are trying to bring them back, a process known as de-extinction. Proponents of de-extinction have suggested several uses for the unextinct pigeons. The passenger pigeon is considered a keystone species, which is a species "known to crucially affect the overall function of an ecosystem," so reintroducing the birds into the environment would supposedly keep other endangered species from disappearing too.[12] The birds of prey that once hunted passenger pigeons would have their food source back. Passenger pigeons could also regenerate the forests of eastern North America by periodically disturbing them, a positive process that helps to cultivate biodiversity.[13] They might even show up on menus again. But the passenger pigeon's extinction left much more than a "grave ecological hole," as animal law attorney Taylor Waters has written.[14] It also left a wound on the body of history that will not heal, no matter how many attempts are made to raise them from the dead by cloning. The same Enlightenment principles that wiped them from the planet cannot bring them back, not as they were.

De-extinction, Britt Wray writes, "is a sham. In no way can we ever undo the erasure of an entire way of life."[15] That's because no one can really bring back the dead. What de-extinction does is introduce "a new organism — perhaps even a new species — that can live and act, with varying success, like an extinct species."[16] In other words, the process wouldn't bring back the passenger pigeon but would instead create a species that mimics the passenger pigeon — a species simulacrum, if you will. This isn't of much concern to de-extinction enthusiasts; to them, "[i]f it looks like a duck and acts like a duck, it's a good enough duck — or passenger pigeon."[17]

Perhaps the most well-known passenger pigeon de-extinction project is the Great Passenger Pigeon Comeback, begun in 2012 by Revive &

Restore, a conservation organization committed to reversing species loss.[18] In her book *Rise of the Necrofauna: The Science, Ethics, and Risks of De-Extinction*, Wray describes Ben Novak, Revive & Restore's lead scientist, as a Tolkien-obsessed dreamer gripped by the fantasy of the passenger pigeon, driven by nostalgia to see them flock once again. "There was something about the tragic fact that [Novak] would never get to experience these enchanting birds up close in real life," writes Wray, "that they were at once real but also sort of supernatural. He couldn't let it go."[19]

The de-extinction of the passenger pigeon involves much more than just the re-introduction of the species into the environment, because extinction is as much a social trauma as it is an environmental one. It involves multiple factors, one of which, in the case of the passenger pigeon, is market logic. The birth of modern food production and the market for pigeon meat sped up the feedback loops of extinction. There are also technological factors. Species do not disappear simply because humans are hungry animals with guns. Inventions such as the telegraph and the railroad hastened the extinction of passenger pigeons. The telegraph system allowed hunters to swiftly communicate the locations of nesting grounds to each other, and shipments of pigeon meat could be transported quickly by railroad across the country. This provides us with an important lesson about anthropogenic extinction: the technologies that some humans build accelerate the devastation. Not every human invention will destroy the world, but some do more damage than others.[20]

All of these variables figured into the equation of the passenger pigeon's extinction. And so you can't just reverse the process of extinction, that is unless you view it merely as a problem of species disappearance. Then you might think that making the necrofauna magically reappear will "solve" their extinction. But something is always left out of de-extinction efforts. There is always a hidden constant in extinction that is historically dependent, a problematic ambiguity that must be reckoned with but may

never fully be known, like the + *C* of an antiderivative. Those blinded by nostalgia are very good at ignoring contextual randomness and the fragile contingency of history. They will forge ahead in their labs, trying to bring back the dead, history be damned, because de-extinction is fueled by an obsessive nostalgia.

In 1918, John Mason Clarke, the director of the New York State Museum, received a letter from a birdwatcher swearing he had seen a small flock of passenger pigeons in a buckwheat field.[21] Yet, even before Martha was placed in captivity, the passenger pigeon was already gone. They were no longer flocking by the end of the nineteenth century but were instead taking on a kind of second life, one inspired by the nostalgia to see and hear them once again. However, conservationist Aldo Leopold knew that this second life was a forgery:

> There will always be pigeons in books and in museums, but these are effigies and images, dead to all hardships and to all delights. Book-pigeons cannot dive out of a cloud to make the deer run for cover, nor clap their wings in thunderous applause of mast-laden woods. They know no urge of seasons; they feel no kiss of sun, no lash of wind and weather; they live forever by not living at all.[22]

In an essay written in 1947 to commemorate a Wisconsin monument to the passenger pigeon, Leopold refused to ignore industrialism's role in accelerating the pigeon's extinction. In crushing, mournful prose he questions the progress of civilization if it means the disappearance of other species. "Because our sorrow is genuine, we are tempted to believe that we had no part in the demise of the pigeon," he writes. "The truth is that our grandfathers, who did the actual killing, were our agents. They were our agents in the sense that they shared the conviction, which we have only now begun to doubt, that it is more important to multiply people and comforts than to cherish the beauty of the land in which they live."[23] He sweeps

away any accusations of nostalgia, which he speculates the “economic moralists” may accuse him of since they thought the pigeon’s doom was inevitable — that if the hunters hadn’t killed off the pigeons then the farmers would have. “Perhaps this is true,” he writes, “but perhaps it is also true that we did away with an idea, as well as a bird. It is one of the ironies of science that it discovers, ex post facto, a philosophical significance in what it has previously tossed into the dust-bin.”[24] If Leopold felt nostalgia at the time of his writing, it wasn’t for restoring the passenger pigeon to its privileged place in the sky. He knew that book-pigeons are also simulacra, suspended between immortality and extinction, and that they’re nothing like the real thing — and no scientific formula will ever bring them back. Looking backwards in righteous yearning, he did what every human should do when mourning the loss of species: condemn those responsible and offer warnings for the future.

Who Started the Fire?

Not all extinctions are equal. There is background extinction, which is the very slow dying-out of species that occurs over entire epochs. Then there is mass extinction. “Instead of a background hum” of dying out, a mass extinction is like “a crash.”[25] Since the Enlightenment, the terrible truth of mass extinction has slowly revealed itself to humans.[26] At the turn of the nineteenth century, the French naturalist Georges Cuvier delivered a lecture in Paris on the theory of species disappearance. Studying strange fossils of an animal that would later be named the mastodon, Cuvier hypothesized that extinction wasn’t “an isolated but a widespread phenomenon,” as Elizabeth Kolbert writes in her book, *The Sixth Extinction*. Cuvier realized that the fossils he had been studying were similar to living things, but not quite.[27] They were more like traces of organisms that used to exist.

The “discovery” of extinction was a paradigm shift, as it made scientists realize that life isn’t static, that it has a history “marked by loss and punctuated by events too terrible for human imagining.”[28] This was around the same time that nostalgia was starting to break out among the troops in revolutionary France. Many were looking back, both to understand the past and to survive the revolutionary present, and they were struggling with what they saw. When Cuvier and other naturalists looked back far enough, they came face to face with a horrible truth: looking back at the past reveals that some things end.

Paleontologists have identified five major mass extinctions in Earth’s history. But it is the ongoing extinction event, caused by human activity, that led climatologist Paul Crutzen to describe our time as the Anthropocene epoch.[29] From emitting greenhouse gases into the air to re-routing the courses of rivers, humans have been altering the face of Earth for a long time, yet there is no established starting point for the Anthropocene and no agreed-upon target to hoist blame. This has led some to question the term. Is it really that *all* humans destroy the Earth equally? Philosopher Chris J. Cuomo isn’t convinced. She thinks that generalizing “humans” broadly as causers of climate change in the Anthropocene “denies humanity’s phenomenal historical and philosophical diversity.”[30] She continues:

> [I]s humanity, *anthropos*, or *Homo Sapiens* really the responsible party behind mass species endangerment, ocean acidification, fossil fuel pollution, deforestation, and nuclear fallout? Clearly it is some humans, and not others, who have devised, propagated and profited from the characteristic industries (and moral atrocities) of the so-called anthropocene.[31]

Blaming the entire human race for the crime of destroying the planet not only ignores those cultures that have respected natural processes, but also

condemns the humans who are leaving a lighter carbon footprint behind. This anti-human position will get us nowhere, Cuomo argues, as it "feeds into a dismal and misanthropic conception of human nature as ultimately anti-nature, violent, and destructive."[32]

And yet, when we look deeply into the past, this position doesn't account for the megafauna extinctions that have occurred over the last 50,000 years. These extinction events happened in pulses: first in Australia, then in the Americas, and eventually around the world. Scientists studying them have offered numerous theories as to why they occurred when they did. Perhaps climate change played a role, or maybe disease. But the pulses follow two curious patterns that point to a more shocking possibility. First, the extinctions wiped out most of the larger mammals: giant flightless birds, tortoises, armadillos, and so forth. These were the days when mammals grew to enormous sizes, but they vanished in the pulses. Second, the pulses occurred in regions where humans settled. Everywhere our ancestors went, the giant mammals disappeared.[33]

The "overkill hypothesis," as it's called, posits that human beings drove giant species to extinction by hunting them systematically. Early human arrivers to the Americas, for example, wore down large species like the mastodon by attrition, gradually killing them at a rate faster than they could reproduce — a sort of rehearsal for the blitzkrieg effect that would decimate the passenger pigeons. "There is no species, however abundant, that can survive perpetual, uncontrolled persecution in which… killing… far exceeds fecundity," paleontologist Julian Hume has written.[34] The phasing out of gigantism among mammals was likely due to overkilling, and the humans who lived tens of thousands of years ago wouldn't have noticed they were the ones doing the killing. "[I]f every band of ten hunters killed off just one diprotodon a year," Elizabeth Kolbert writes, "within about seven hundred years, every diprotodon within several hundred miles would have been gone."[35]

Early humans were gifted at felling entire species but cursed with the ignorance of extinction. “[T]he decline of the megafauna would have been so slow as to be imperceptible,” writes Kolbert. “They would have had no way of knowing that centuries earlier, mammoths and diprotodons had been much more common.”[36] The overkill hypothesis is strong enough for Kolbert to speculate that the Anthropocene didn’t start with the Industrial Revolution but rather with *humans*. It’s true that the invention of the steam engine in the 1700s kicked off a new geologic era in which industrial humans started leaving a lasting carbon imprint in the Earth’s crust, as Timothy Morton has written.[37] And the exponential surge of growth since the Second World War, known as the Great Acceleration, has ramped up the industrial feedback loops. Technological ubiquity, agribusiness, the production of concrete, air travel, and the pumping of greenhouse gases into the sky have all dramatically warmed the planet to unsustainable temperatures, unleashing furious climatic events that increase in severity yearly. But when you look at time geologically, over thousands of years, a more startling truth rears its ugly head. Industrialized humans, indoctrinated by religions of mastery, seduced by profits, and forcing their way to utopia, built upon the lethal work started by the very first humans.

Extinction and Nostalgia

It was the discovery of extinction that dovetailed with the appearance of nostalgia, as people living at the turn of the nineteenth century “started noticing material changes and developed a strong sense of historical motion and epochal change, a sense that the future will be very different from the past.”[38] Demarcating past from present, many began to internalize the passage of time and, along with it, the disappearance of things. Today the disappearance of species, our own or another’s, fills us with such dread that

many look to the past to understand how we got here, or to simply escape the unthinkable.

From an early age we are introduced to long-gone creatures. “Extinction may be the first scientific idea that kids today have to grapple with,” Kolbert writes, thanks to the persistent popularity of dinosaur toys.[39] I can attest to this. The majority of my own childhood toys were dinosaurs: Tyrannosaurus Rex, Brontosaurus, Velociraptor, Triceratops. It seemed unreal that these beasts used to roam the Earth. Imagining their titanic size made the relatively large world around me even larger, yet as toys they were small enough to hold in my hand. Still, I remember feeling a strange sadness knowing I would never get to see them, never get to hear what they actually sounded like, never get to study a living specimen. My dreams of being a paleontologist were dashed when I visited a museum and stared up at a towering sauropod skeleton for the first time. I was intrigued but not nearly as fascinated as when my local museum hosted a kind of “living dinosaurs” exhibit, complete with provocative animatronics that jerked their robotic heads and bellowed guttural growls.

No doubt my interest in dinosaurs was due to *Jurassic Park*, which I watched as a young child (probably too young). To this day, the original film is a favorite of mine, but that’s partially because I stopped watching the sequels. I saw *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* when it was released in theaters and enjoyed it simply because it starred Steven Spielberg’s dinosaurs. I could tell it lacked an element the original had, but as a child I didn’t really care. But one sequel wasn’t enough; I longed for a third movie to round out a trilogy. When *Jurassic Park III* was released in 2001, I basically ran to the theater, only to be let down by it. It felt like fan service, which of course it was. And yet, I had gotten what I wished for, and the result was worse than if no third film had been made. More sequels were released afterwards, and I realized that the goal of it becoming a franchise wasn’t to tell new stories, but to redeliver the high of the original. This is

the trickery of nostalgia. *Jurassic Park* fans would probably be a little disappointed meeting a real dinosaur in the flesh and scales. It wouldn't look like the ones in the movies.

Svetlana Boym referred to the impulse to bring back dinosaurs with advanced special effects as "Jurassic Park syndrome."[40] Jurassic Park syndrome drives many to indulge in the fairy tales offered by the franchise — particularly the theme that science can bring these creatures back but is also powerless to stop them. The franchise delivers a potent rush, as we watch modern humans barely escape their violent creations. Some won't make it out alive; they'll be dinosaur food. But in each film, the "hero and heroine revisit [Jurassic Park] and leave voluntarily" — or, at least, flee quickly if they can.[41]

Many enjoy watching the tension play out between technology's promises and limits in a prehistoric theme park onscreen, because "[d]inosaurs are ideal animals for the nostalgia industry."[42] Filmmakers can take liberties in portraying them without upsetting anyone, and then their films can be exported globally, spreading specific ideas about what dinosaurs looked like and how they acted. On the screen they are so impressive that it seems as if they've been fully restored. And who can say? Maybe the special effects teams got it right. But we'll never know.

There's no question in *Jurassic Park* that the dinosaurs will be cloned and brought back. We aren't shown the scientific challenges in trying to pull off such a Herculean feat. Instead, the film teaches us that anything is possible with science, including de-extinction, and even though the dinosaurs might kill characters onscreen, they can't do so much damage as to render the franchise unwatchable. The past might come back angry in *Jurassic Park*, but it comes back, nonetheless.

The way we remember, and yearn for, extinct species reveals a lot about how we think of ourselves in relation to nonhumans. While we consider onscreen dinosaurs spectacular and impressive creatures that fill us with

awe, we don’t feel the same about other extinct species. Take the dodo, for example. Discovered by European traders on the island of Mauritius in the 1590s, it was extinct within fifty years. Dodos lived mainly near the coast of the island, and there is reason to believe there weren’t many of them to begin with. But hungry sailors passing through hunted them for meat and introduced foreign species, like pigs and macaques, that also led to their demise. Unlike the passenger pigeon, there is no complete stuffed dodo in existence, but there are taxidermized counterfeits everywhere. And the dodo is remembered much differently than the passenger pigeon. It has become “the ultimate symbol of what can go wrong when man and nature come together.”[43] It would probably be long forgotten if it weren’t for Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland,* which featured a dodo character illustrated by Sir John Tenniel. They have since been used in advertising campaigns to promote sales that won’t last forever and in political cartoons parodying obsolete partisan views.

The dodo has become a symbol of not just extinction but also outdatedness. We talk of things being “dead as a dodo.” If something “goes the way of the dodo,” it isn’t just gone, it’s laughably obsolete and out of touch. Even the word dodo likely comes from the Portuguese for “idiot.”[44] The cultural punning of the dodo reveals a latent tendency to believe that extinction happens to those creatures that are too strange-looking to survive. To some the dodo looked silly, so its disappearance was justified. It lacks the awesomeness of dinosaurs, or the majesty of the mammoth, or the compelling extinction story of the passenger pigeon. But it doesn’t lack their celebrity status, which is striking because very little is known about the actual species. For post-dodo humans, that doesn’t matter much. The dodo is more alive today than it was before the last one died. It had to be extinct for it to become an icon, for extinction proves to be quite useful for some people when they want it to be. Once hunted for food, it now serves a different purpose for humans.[45]

Of course, this is how we think of the dodo, not how we might react if we saw one. No one can say for sure what a genuine reaction would be, because no dodos are left alive. So people fill in the gaps, sometimes with jokes and sometimes with junk science. “Perhaps the loss of this creature affronts people at a very deep level and there is a genuine psychological need to somehow re-invent the living bird,” Errol Fuller writes in his book on the dodo. “People want to touch the dodo and it is, of course, impossible to touch a shadow.”[46]

The Neanderthal is also a creature whose extinction seems justified according to the way it’s remembered. In the Neander Valley in Germany, the site of the first discovered Neanderthal bones, there is a Neanderthal Museum where you can buy themed merchandise and have your picture taken and edited to look like a Neanderthal.[47] In popular imagery, Neanderthals always appear a little like Bigfoot: “bent-kneed, hunched over, and brutish.”[48] They are either represented as vicious threats or ignorant oafs. In “The Grisly Folk” by H.G. Wells, they are depicted as predators who had to be killed off for *Homo sapiens* to survive. In their caveman form, the one seen in cartoons and advertisements, they’re only ever accidentally dangerous because they’re too dumb to know better. The popular GEICO Cavemen ad campaign of the early 2000s bucked this trend and directly addressed our collective prejudice towards them by representing the title characters as sophisticated but misunderstood.

Speciesism can be used to reinforce human superiority over other animals that couldn’t learn to adapt and, therefore, went extinct, or to distance one from the sheer horror that humans are causing the sixth mass extinction in Earth’s history. Either way, the sentiment frames the past as a naïve, backwards time when stupid hindrances or hostile threats stood in the way of human domination.

If we aren’t careful, several extant species will go the way of the dodo. They’ll go the way of the passenger pigeon, too. Will future people think

that giant pandas were simply in the way? I've never even touched a panda. Is it already a shadow?

Impossible Species

It wasn't until the United States dropped nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, long after Cuvier gave his lecture, that people started considering that we too could go the way of the dodo, that humans weren't exempt from extinction.[49] And the deeper that we peered into the past, the more threatening human extinction became. We learned that an asteroid was the likely culprit that killed off the dinosaurs, which, as Thomas Moynihan notes, "helped bolster a sense that our stellar neighbourhood represents an enveloping field of roaming hazard, rather than a reliably stable or secure system."[50] By the twenty-first century, over a hundred years of global temperature records indicated that Earth had been quickly warming up and that, if the warming continued, all the planet's interactants would be threatened — us included.

In her story "An Incomplete Timeline of What We Tried," Debbie Urbanski lists the methods that future humans might use to stave off human extinction. The story is simply an unnumbered list starting at the top with human extinction and ending with, "Turn off the lights when you are no longer in the room." One line reads, "Watch eco-horror movies on family movie night to explain to your children that this is what their future will look like unless they do something radical about it." Near the bottom, Urbanski merely writes: "Ride a bicycle." Midway down the list, she includes, "De-extinction of the passenger pigeon." But it is the beginning of her piece that is truly horrifying:

Human extinction.

> The coordinated release of various strains of a human sterilization virus.
>
> The no-child laws.
>
> The launching of the Colony into space, no final destination in mind, for those able to afford the journey.
>
> Retraction of health care services for the ill and/or “undesirables.”
>
> Resurgence of prayer.
>
> The demolition of nursing homes and/or retirement homes in the redlined countries that have reached or surpassed their maximum population density.[51]

Urbanski’s choice to start her list with extinction and work backwards illustrates a fundamental truth: we learn about the demise of species by studying the past, by going backwards through history and charting the patterns. The more nostalgic we are for these species, the further back we look, and the more we realize that humans are partly responsible for some of the worst extinction events in history. It is a process that’s both enlightening and enraging. We can learn how we got here, in the midst of a mass extinction caused by industrial humans, and perhaps put that knowledge to use, to try and save whatever species we can from going the way of the dodo.

The first time I read Urbanski’s story, I felt the strange pangs of a simulated nostalgia. The people of an inhospitable future, like the one described in her story, will be nostalgic for the days of composting, solar panels, and riding bicycles. Some will try to wind back the clock, like the

de-extinction scientists. Hopefully, others will climb all the way up the mast, fighting as the ship goes down.

Humans haven't yet gone extinct, but countless other species are dying away at an alarming rate. As the die-off escalates, species nostalgia will spread. We might even find ourselves nostalgic for the human species one day. Some will yearn to bring the extinct ones back, and they will find that such an experiment isn't so easy. We must instead be like Aldo Leopold, who was nostalgic for the passenger pigeon but knew there was no going back. We can ache for a time when these species were alive while also condemning the agents of extinction, the ones who are so quick to sacrifice everything in the name of scientific progress.

A friend recently sent me some clickbait that I found surprisingly startling. Someone had posted a series of pixelated images of different endangered animals. The number of pixels used in each image matched the number of animals left of that species. Between 40,000 and 50,000 pixels were used in the image of the Asian elephant because there are about that many left in the world. The image is blurry, but you can still tell it's an elephant. The Bengal tiger, however, was made up of only 2,500 pixels. Its image is starting to blur beyond recognition. Soon it will be like the image of the Amur leopard: a pattern of sixty colored blocks. It's an abstract work of art, perhaps, but not a picture of an animal.

The photo series is meant to elicit a gut reaction, and I felt it. The choice to use pixels to match the number of extant animals struck me too. Many of these species are being wiped out by the wave of human technological progress. They're fading into data, de-rezzing into static. The pixelated images invite us to view the animals through the glitched lattice of industrial capitalism and its destructive inventions: the engine, the bomb, the computer.

The series is not unlike Christina Seely's *Next of Kin*, an exhibit that asks visitors to stare into portraits of different taxidermized species close to

extinction, from the jaguar to the grizzly bear. The pictures are framed in lightboxes outfitted with two-way mirrors, which gradually darken as you look at them, at last revealing your own face staring back at you. The implication is clear: humans play a role in species disappearance.

How many more days left until the coastlines disappear? When will the last Bengal tiger die? How can we live knowing that our species has been wiping out others for thousands of years, and unfettered capitalism is only getting better at it?

Looking at faded photographs of extinct animals, they seem impossible, destined for disappearance. They are too strange, too majestic, their colors too vibrant or behaviors too idiosyncratic, to live among us. Some were giant; they too seem impossible. There were owls that laughed like carnival barkers, birds ten feet tall, horses the size of small dogs. They had names like auroch, quagga, and thylacine — archaic words lost to time. Some disappeared without the help of humans. Others were, and will continue to be, victims of the Anthropocene.

Conclusion
The Right to Nostalgia

A low-pressure system began forming in the Caribbean Sea in mid-October 2020. At first, it didn't look to be very alarming, but it eventually grew into Tropical Depression Twenty-Eight, then into Tropical Storm Zeta. It finally reached its peak as a Category 2 hurricane after roaring through Mexico and Jamaica, where it triggered a deadly landslide. On October 28th, Hurricane Zeta made landfall in Louisiana and traveled quickly upwards, weakening along the way through north Georgia, but with winds strong enough to blow over a tree onto the bedroom of a house where my sister-in-law and her husband were sleeping.

For a while, I couldn't make sense of their death. How could this have happened? It seemed too remote, the possibility of losing them so quickly in such a shocking way. Once they were here, now they're gone — I couldn't wrap my head around it. My wife, Anna, and I were stunned, going through the rote motions of living, lost in a fog, prone to outbursts and collapses. Grieving feels a lot like being a ghost, like I was trapped in a strange loop and couldn't remember anything, or like I had been knocked out of time, stuck in some limbo, forced to labor under the nauseating weight of their loss.

It didn't take very long for nostalgia to set in. Memories would flash at random, things I had long forgotten: beach vacations, quick conversations, the way he talked, the way she laughed, the last time we saw them. Our first act was to lay the picture frames face down; they unleashed a torrent of

nostalgia, completely unbearable. With each passing holiday, we yearned for experiences we'll never have with them — a nostalgia for what could have been, for a life where they didn't die. It felt as if someone had switched the tracks and we were suddenly moving down a different path, watching as the junction receded into the distance, the point at which everything changed growing less and less reachable. But there was no turning back. We were headed into a future neither of us wanted, and we would have done anything to reverse time's flow, to go back to how things were before our world came crashing down around us. But all we have now are memories that flicker between soothing and aching — the gray grief of nostalgia.

If you had told me to stop feeling nostalgic, I wouldn't have known how. I couldn't just suck it up and deal with the loss. We wanted nothing to do with the future, and why should we? What good is a future without them? Of course, we'll go on. We have to go on. But the nostalgia will follow us, soothing and aching in equal measure, for years to come. It is already so bound up with my feelings of grief and sorrow that there's no way I can just excise it. And this is a crucial truth to remember.

Nostalgia is unavoidable in an era when freak hurricanes storm through communities in an exceptionally active, record-breaking hurricane season. It's unavoidable when a novel virus spreads across the world and impacts the vulnerable in countries where leaders care more about corporations than people. It's unavoidable when nationstates wage perpetual war and send off their own citizens to fight and die for abstract ideals. Nostalgia is an unavoidable reaction to the traumas of the modern world. We don't need some reality check to awaken us from the emotion. What we need is a livable world, one that supports real people when crises happen and that doesn't exacerbate them through selfishness, greed, and the thirst for power. Over the next century, plenty of people are going to experience loss — loss

of loved ones, their home, their way of life — and they're going to feel nostalgia, too.

And yet, in a cruel twist, it is our nostalgia that media industries and ruling elites have exploited. There is a lot of money to be made off nostalgia, and there is a surplus of the feeling to go around. It is, after all, a primary emotional response in a society of control. But it has long served as an instrument of control. Remember that the earliest recorded nostalgics were those who lost control at the hands of state violence and industrial discipline: slaves, soldiers, migrants, and factory workers. Nostalgia scared military leaders, so they endeavored to discipline it out of citizen-soldiers. Slave masters believed their chattel couldn't feel it, but after emancipation the narrative changed: Blacks were too nostalgic. It was associated with "[s]avages, men living under the rudest forms of civilization" in the nineteenth century.[1] Positivist psychologists saw the "nostalgic subject as a species of *homo criminalis*," the criminal sick with yearning, and worried about the link between nostalgia and juvenile delinquency in the early twentieth century.[2] Psychologists after the Second World War saw it as a condition of the lower classes, something an educated person just wouldn't be bothered with.[3] For centuries, nostalgic subjects were ridiculed, humiliated, told to work harder, ordered to love their country, buried alive, or thrown behind bars. What was once a normal emotional response had become suspect and remains so to this day.

In the twenty-first century, countless groups of people have lost control of their lives and the time left to live them. Scientists tell us we are running out of time to fight global warming. Lifetimes are halted for the ones suffering from long-term diseases and disabilities, as well as the incarcerated — the ones "doing time."[4] Individuals navigating the narrow mazes of a control society are limited in their movements, locked out of certain places because of the color of their skin or their country of origin. Their behaviors are policed: they are told which bathrooms they cannot

enter, how much money they can earn, what they can afford to do. They are dragged down by debt, persecuted for their sexual orientation, constrained by the built environment, ordered to work according to a clock with no hours. They are instructed to privatize their health, to seek help only from themselves, and to fear those who don't look like them. Under these regimes of control, I don't see how anyone could live free of nostalgic feelings.

The present is no utopia, and the future isn't shaping up to be one either. Nostalgia provides a nice escape from it all, a necessary break from the anxiety of the Anthropocene, but it can also inspire social change in ways other emotions cannot. At this point it's clear that if we continue looking down our nose at nostalgia, then we aren't much better than the positivists who once thought nostalgia needed to be cured for a person to be a contributing member of society. But if we hide away in nostalgia's warmth forever, then we risk losing the present to capitalism, which just might eliminate the future for all of us.

Disappearing Acts

"Disappearance," Franco Berardi notes, "is the mark of nostalgia."[5] Media theorist Michael Dwyer wrote the same sentiment in reverse: nostalgia is an affective response to things "lacking in our current conditions," often felt when something we thought was relatively stable, or someone we believed would be by our side forever, suddenly vanishes.[6] Disappeared things once existed and presumably still do somewhere, although we can't be sure, but they aren't commonly encountered in the present anymore. They reside in the past, when we were younger, and our only access to them is through nostalgia.[7]

The dread of disappearance is a daily subjective experience for many living in neoliberal states. Fearing job loss, pushed to compete, and taught

only to help ourselves, we must learn to live with constant change and the terror of disappearance. We await the next shock to the system — recession, pandemic, austerity, or worse — and witness as entire industries and lives are obliterated. Anxiety and depression rates surge, as more and more people experience social erosion. Those who do not save for disasters perish; those not entrepreneurial, admonished. When humans are taught to behave like markets, the upshot is a precarious life: volatile, uncertain, contingent, and stressed.

Information loss is a natural occurrence, and it's especially prevalent, and dreadful, in a society obsessed with eliminating unknowns. But sometimes, disappearance is artificially induced to serve certain interests. Ideas that challenge ruling ideologies, especially the ones that resist capital, are erased. Memories of radical events are written out of history, consigning non-normative knowledge to the margins, very often deleting them from the official account altogether. If they do survive, traces of these events hunker underground, or they hide beneath the cover of normativity, passing as "appropriate" but occasionally winking from behind the veil at those who also know. If they are eradicated, stamped out of the cultural script, radical memories will always return as ghosts, terribly inconvenient reminders of an alternative future that was foreclosed by capitalism.[8]

In order for neoliberal capitalism to exist, certain things must disappear, and often. Once-stable jobs disappear. Healthcare disappears. Automation erases careers from the workforce. Marginalized populations disappear from sight. Species vanish. Older social realities, memories of ideological alternatives before the End of History, ideas that challenge market logic — these too must disappear for neoliberalism to reign at last supreme. Those ideas not legible through neoliberalism's grid are tossed away, and marketing campaigns are launched to induce social forgetting, to consign the messy truths of history to oblivion. And the ones who seek to resist

neoliberalism's shock therapy, as Naomi Klein calls it, are also routinely disappeared.

By the mid-1970s, Augusto Pinochet was forcefully disappearing thousands of political opponents in Chile. Animated by American free-market ideology, Chile began a neoliberal conversion in the 1970s, and anyone who opposed it was punished. Some were thrown from helicopters into the ocean; others simply vanished. Decades later, the United States would wage its own regime of disappearance. Conducting "extraordinary rendition" in the wake of 9/11, CIA agents abducted so-called enemy combatants, transported them to makeshift prisons, and tortured them for information about global terror cells. Forty of these combatants remain at Guantanamo Bay, a concentration camp operated by the US. The prisoners kept there are "ghost detainees": neither dead nor alive, liminal, in between the cogs of a ruthless penal machine beholden to no one. Their flickering presence/ absence haunts the American imaginary.

The disappeared often leave behind families and loved ones, who go on searching for them, driven by a restless nostalgia. The families of Chile's disappeared are the subjects of the 2010 documentary *Nostalgia for the Light*, which explores the history of the Atacama Desert in Chile, where astronomers flock from all over to observe a nearly cloudless sky, and where Pinochet buried the remains of the disappeared in mass graves. Families search the ground for their loved ones, decades after their forced disappearance, while scientists point their telescopes at the sky. Violeta Berríos is one of the interviewees in the film; her partner, Mario, was disappeared by Pinochet's secret police in October 1973. Roaming the desert in search of his remains, she remarks, "I wish the telescopes didn't just look into the sky, but could also see through the earth, so that we could find them."[9] Berríos is also featured in Paula Allen's book *Flowers in the Desert: The Search for Chile's Disappeared*. Aching with nostalgia, she

imagines meeting Mario again: “I would say, ‘How are you? I am so happy you are alive. I still love you.’”[10]

Theories emerge to explain disappearances, and sometimes these theories are proposed by the very ones who did the disappearing act. “They say they unearthed them, put them in bags and threw them into the sea,” Berríos says in *Nostalgia for the Light*, referring to the bodies of the disappeared that were supposedly buried in the desert. “Did they really throw them into the sea? At this point in my life, I’m seventy, I find it hard to believe what I’m told. They taught me not to believe.” Berríos’ refusal to accept what she’s told might sound like a refusal to face reality, which so many claim is obscured by the oft-maligned emotion of nostalgia. But official statements are occasionally written to bury the evidence of state violence, and nostalgia can empower the ones left behind to dig it up. Sometimes, what looks to be an unyielding nostalgia for a past that never existed is just a skepticism to accept as gospel official statements explaining questionable disappearances.[11]

Marked by longing, nostalgia can hurt. Conjuring the memories of the disappeared into the present is a painful process because, as Amy tells Sethe in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, “Anything dead coming back to life hurts.”[12] It can be a discomforting experience to face the fact that the past is both dream and nightmare, but we mustn’t forget this. The subjective feeling of nostalgia isn’t negative only. Nostalgia can empower the present to envision a just future by looking back to those moments when collective action stood up to gross abuses of power. It doesn’t only have to be about “getting back there,” in restoring what’s been lost, but in learning from, and yearning for, those who came before.

In his unfinished introduction to *Acid Communism*, Mark Fisher wrote, “The past has to be continually re-narrated, and the political point of reactionary narratives is to suppress the potentials which still await, ready to be re-awakened, in older moments.”[13] Nostalgia, too, can be a re-

awakening. It has the emotional power to conjure up the potentials of the past that are constantly being paved over by capital. The past is a kind of battleground, where the fight over memory is waged. One of our nostalgic goals should be to return to the front and listen to the ghosts who roam the graying battlefield where the smoke still hangs in the air. To open up the radical potentials of the past from those cruel enough to suppress them is "less an act of remembering than of *unforgetting*," as Fisher wrote.[14]

It might seem backwards to talk of nostalgia in this way. Progressive politics have always been about looking to the future, envisioning a better society than what's in the present, moving forward, and sparking change. It seems like nostalgia has no place in progressivism. But we live in a time in which the future is uncertain. It feels like we aren't in control of creating the future ourselves, that the future is being decided for us by tech companies, which, every year, is increasingly looking more dystopian. The past, on the other hand, seems so much more stable. That doesn't mean it was, but we can take elements from the past and put them to use in the present — and perhaps, as a result, work towards a more habitable future.

The Roots of Radical Nostalgia

"Throughout the last century nostalgia was cast as the antithesis of radicalism," Alastair Bonnett writes in *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia*.[15] "Until recently one could say almost anything about nostalgia, as long as it was damning, and few would object."[16] This has been the ruling opinion for quite some time, but as I've demonstrated in this book, it's time to question it.

What's worse, Bonnett asks, nostalgia or the messages of neoliberal capitalism "that extol the future and warn of the dangers of stasis, the failure to change"?[17] This future-facing rhetoric circulates through Western society today, "[f]rom boardrooms to classrooms," and it's emphatically

promoted by major multinationals, from weapons manufacturers to Big Tech.[18] With so many misty-eyed CEOs worshipping growth and progress, nostalgia by comparison can seem "less sentimental than looking to the future" and, at times, less destructive.[19] After all, it was the early European dream of a progressive evolution from the "static and moribund societies of Asia and Africa" that midwifed colonial empire.[20]

Bonnett points out that "within the modern, ostensibly anti-nostalgic, left there exists a profound sense of loss" and "that such yearnings are not a cancerous or alien intrusion but integral to the radical imagination."[21] In fact, he argues that radicalism and nostalgia are more intertwined than we may think:

> The word "radical" derives from the Latin for root (*radix*). Used as a political term, radicalism refers to the desire to grasp and pull up the roots of an existing political arrangement, usually with the hope that an equally deeply planted but very different alternative can be nurtured in its place. Yet radicalism has another, very different, relationship to roots. In this version radicalism grows from roots: it emerges from authentic social experience; it is the voice from below, the cry of the people against an uprooted elite. This narrative identifies the enemies of radicalism with those who seek to dig away at memory, to grub up organic identities and reduce communities to malleable individuals without ties of loyalty or attachment.[22]

We have a right to our roots, which nurture us and keep us grounded. However, capitalism tears up these roots and then tells the rootless that staying put will hinder their ability to compete for a job. That is, unless your mobility frightens the ones who want a closed system of movement, a gated community into which outsiders aren't allowed. The Anglo nationalism of the West, stoked by Brexit in the UK and the Department of

Homeland Security in the US, orders migrants to stay put and suffer the uprooting of climate collapse and free trade precarity.

It is this general skepticism of roots and home that helps to popularize the condescending treatment of nostalgia. And rightfully so: violent imperial campaigns have been waged in the name of the homeland. But this doesn't mean we should shun the idea of home altogether, as philosopher Barbara Cassin has suggested. "When, then, are we ever at home?" she asks, answering that we are, in fact, "never at home."[23] "Rather than cultivating roots," she advises us to "cultivate the elsewhere."[24] This doesn't seem possible. Can't we cultivate both? Is it really possible, or even preferable, to claim we can never go home? Is it really a good thing to discourage people from planting roots? Doesn't that notion play into the hands of entrepreneurialism, which eggs people on to move where the jobs are, develop a "side hustle" after work hours, and climb their way up the business ladder? After all, "being footloose and flexible is a corporate ideal," as Alastair Bonnett points out.[25]

Forms of radical nostalgia, or something quite like it, have shown up throughout recent history. Several creative movements of the twentieth century embraced radical nostalgia: the anachronistic avant-garde, the transgressive surrealists, the primal Dadaists.[26] These movements sought to challenge the "technocentric and exclusionary landscapes of modernity" by drawing on the ordinary and the primitive.[27] Peter Glazer references several "music-driven commemorations of the Spanish Civil War" as examples of radical nostalgia that "reinfus[e] lost histories with credibility, substance, and emotional resonance."[28] And during the Native American removals and forced assimilation programs of the nineteenth century, the Ghost Dance of Paiute leader Wovoka and its Lakota interpretation were a kind of radical yearning for the day when "life would be free of disease and colonialism, and correct relations among human and nonhuman worlds would be restored."[29] In *Our History Is the Future*, an account of Indigenous

resistance, Nick Estes explains that the Ghost Dance wasn't "escapist, but rather part of a growing anticolonial theory and movement… a utopian dream that briefly suspended the nightmare of the 'wretched present' by folding the remembered experience of a precolonial freedom into an anti-colonial future."[30]

Although we might associate nostalgia with conservatism, radical nostalgia has rarely been supported by the right. Glazer's book on radical nostalgia reveals the strategies some on the right have employed to rewrite the history of the Spanish Civil War. For example, in February 2001, a plaque honoring several New Hampshire men who traveled to Spain in the late 1930s to fight against Francisco Franco and the Nationalists was displayed in the statehouse for about two hours, before a local right-leaning newspaper accused the memorial of celebrating communist sympathizers.[31] Threatening the status quo of a market-driven, neocolonial present, radical nostalgia is often at loggerheads with those who fear what it might unearth.

Think about the contested terrain of the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. A purely nostalgic perspective would regard King as Santa Claus: the patient exemplar of nonviolence and the political foil to Malcolm X. For many white liberals and conservatives, he represents how protestors should behave — not chanting in the streets but elocuting from the pulpit. Of course, this is a grave misreading of historical truth. A radically nostalgic perspective knows better than to be duped by such revisionism. Radical nostalgia yearns for the fierce pacifism of King, his anti-imperialism, anti-racism, and anti-capitalism. Those committed to remaking King into Santa Claus will likely call such yearning a misrepresentation. But the idea that nostalgia misrepresents the past often comes from its power to tell a different story than what is written in history books. Radical nostalgia misrepresents King insofar as it advances a narrative that challenges the official record of his memory, promoted by centrist elites.[32]

Official history is often decided for us. It's codified in textbooks, museums, monuments, and popular culture. And anyone who threatens official history is often named a conspirator. The ones who use nostalgia to buttress power will denounce every monkey wrench thrown into their nostalgia-fueled time machines as a conspiracy. They will charge those of us who cultivate nostalgia towards more prosocial ends with impeding the mission to revive the good old days. This is a defining characteristic of what Svetlana Boym called restorative nostalgia: the belief in a secret cabal working resolutely to destroy the homeland. A more radical nostalgia is not driven by this belief.[33] It knows that no conspiracies are needed to explain what has happened to the world under disaster capitalism.[34]

Outside the Straight and Narrow

Just as we should rethink the idea of home, we must also rethink time. Time doesn't flow forward to an inevitable endpoint. It's constantly being folded, wadded up, torn, and bent, as Michel Serres pointed out. There is certainly a danger to time's uncanny ability to smuggle into the present the retrograde ideologies of the past, but others have recognized the potential of jettisoning the clock, a process that begins by interrogating "time and its influence in ordering life."[35] Rethinking the standard trajectory of time — clock time, lifetimes — will prime us to feel new shades of nostalgia.

The standard, linear conception of time is pivotal in producing what feminist scholar Alison Kafer calls compulsory nostalgia. Compulsory nostalgia is driven by the "cultural expectation" that one must yearn for a "before" version of oneself in order to be "permitted to exist as part of a desired present or a desirable future."[36] Kafer's examples of compulsory nostalgia are the questions disabled people are often asked: "Wouldn't you rather be cured? Wouldn't you like to be as you were before? Wouldn't you prefer to be nondisabled?"[37] Forcing disabled people to yearn for a

nondisabled self, imagined or not, splits them into before and after selves, when they really occupy "both the before and the after at once."[38]

Compulsory nostalgia traps disabled people in what she refers to as "curative time," where they wait for the day to be cured and restored to their former selves, thus also curing the nostalgia. But Kafer argues for "crip time" instead, a reorientation to time that "bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds."[39] Crip time doesn't forget about the future (there *must* be a future, a livable future) but it "imagin[es] different futures and temporalities [that] might help us see, and do, the present differently."[40] To the ableist majority, disability is often seen as a failure, something that must be cured for the future to realize itself, so that there won't be disability anymore.[41] Instead, we must reconsider the very idea of failure in the present by acknowledging "the crip pasts behind us or the crip presents surrounding us," because "these very pasts and presents are what make articulating a critical crip futurity so essential."[42]

Crip time, Kafer points out, is also queer time: bent, odd, not "straight time," which flows in a linear direction through past, present, and future.[43] Straight time is "foundational in the production of normalcy."[44] People are supposed to follow certain paths, meet certain goals in a specific order, and clearly demarcate past from present from future. You go to school, get a job, marry, bear and raise children, retire, and die. Queer cultures, on the other hand, have long lived according to "strange temporalities," as Jack Halberstam has argued.[45]

These are queer times.[46] Time feels very much out of joint — a queer experience indeed, as is feeling nostalgia. A Union soldier in the Civil War, choking up with nostalgia when Union bands would play "Home, Sweet Home," said it best: "I don't like to hear it for it makes me feel queer."[47] Union armies ultimately banned its performance. There would be no queer feelings, no falling out of straight time, but only an order from the top brass

to march straight forward into the blazing, deafening cannonade of the future.

But things only got queerer. The rise of capitalism knocked time out of time, causing competing nostalgias to jockey for the final word on the past. Normative elites have tried to drain nostalgia of its queer potential, but nostalgia has always been a little queer, as Nishant Shahani points out in his book *Queer Retrosexualities*. Shahani admits that the past for queer folks is "traumatic… [and] marked by shame, exile, and persecution."[48] But it is also a shared past, rife with what he sees as "reparative possibilities… for queer thinking."[49] Gilad Padva agrees, writing that nostalgia has the potential to "glorif[y] yesterday's successes, victories, struggles, braveness, and devotedness and… stimulate reconsideration of the past *and* the future."[50] It can be "subversive" for those who are locked "out of the straight and narrow" and a survival tactic for communities under assault.[51]

Shahani admits that relying on nostalgia in these subversive, reparative ways is a "controversial notion, since it can easily slip into a pathologizing narrative of internalized oppression of minority groups."[52] But as Dan Vena points out, some folks can't help but feel nostalgia for what might have been, but wasn't. He writes about his own childhood, when he was assigned female at birth, and his love of Superman comics, which to many adults at the time just looked like he was going through a tomboy phase. But Vena's nostalgia isn't the paradigmatic kind that "align[s] nostalgia with a linear trajectory of time that moves ever forward, thus abandoning the possibility of return," but rather a yearning for the freedom of childhood, when he could "momentarily forget or dismiss the inevitable experience of womanhood." He notes that this yearning still makes him painfully aware that, as a trans man, he never got to experience a "socially sanctioned boyhood." He goes on:

> … the nostalgic experience is one that is literally written onto my body; carved into each surgical scar is my understanding of home,

> of a body that can legitimize my gender. However, during my ongoing transition, I have also realized that I will never acquire the cis body I long for. In a sense, the nostalgic experience becomes my own personal kryptonite. It wounds, just as it harms Superman, through the realization that we have been deprived of something incredibly meaningful. For me it is my home body; for Superman it is his home planet. I (as well as other trans folks) and Superman are both thus held to the mercy of time and memory, haunted by a specter of a past we could (never) have had.[53]

It's a sentiment shared by many who transition later in life, who mourn lost childhoods and even lost adulthoods. Journalist Katelyn Burns has written about her yearning for "the everyday experiences of girlhood" that she missed, including her high school prom. "What is meant to be a cultural hallmark of American adolescence became a panic-attack-inducing ordeal for a closeted trans girl like me," she writes. "The chance to have experienced prom as my true self — as Katelyn — is now long gone."[54] Thomas Page McBee points out that the grief felt by some trans people, the "grief of a childhood that never was," often conjures up nostalgic fantasies of a childhood "full of love and light that could have been." But, he notes, facing this grief of a past that wasn't is crucially important, because it orients us towards the future. "In an ideal world, that's what we would do with our pasts — sublimate them into better futures," he writes.[55]

The dominant understanding of time as linear can convince us that history is long gone, that progress happens for us all, that we all move forward into who we want to be, and that disgusting ideologies shouldn't be around anymore. ("This is the twenty-first century, after all!" they say.) And linear time exacerbates the ache of nostalgia. If time moves in a straight line, then there is no going back, so the nostalgia just festers. The more reactionary strains of nostalgia rely on this pastness of the past. But many of us know the past isn't really that far away. It continues to burst into the

present. In fact, we carry the past, even the darker chapters, with us in the present, so it isn't totally gone forever. This means we can consult the past to chart a path to those better futures Thomas Page McBee writes about. But if we believe the past is really far away, then we'll yearn hopelessly for it, reaching across the gulf of time for something we feel is gone forever.

Yet not every dark chapter of the past gets closed for good. Marginalized populations know this well. They continue to be subject to the past's intolerances, determined by past data, and coerced by old prejudices, which percolate into the present, as Serres noted. Are we really to believe that the "good old days" hearkened back to by demagogues is that far away? For so many, those days of intolerance never went away. Reactionary leaders love to induce nostalgia for the homeland in order to justify atrocious acts and garner support for them. In the process, some of their supporters believe they're inching their way back to the golden years of exploitation, when, in fact, the exploitation never stopped. It merely took new shapes.

All histories are written from a perspective, and very often that perspective privileges the victors. Victors of history have to perpetuate the straight and narrow understanding of time in order to justify progress and bury their crimes against humanity in the desert of the past. But victors above all know that time isn't linear, because they can fold it on itself whenever they want to bring back the jingoistic ideologies everyone thought had died.

A Present That Can Breed Futures

After moving to Montana in the 1850s, Frank Linderman developed a relationship with Plenty Coups, the last chief of the Crow Nation, who agreed to tell Linderman his life story. But there was one part of his life Plenty Coups refused to elaborate. "I can think back and tell you much

more of war and horse-stealing," he told Linderman. "But when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened." Plenty Coups said no more to Linderman about the disappearance of the buffalo beyond this final word: "Besides… you know that part of my life as well as I do. You saw what happened to us when the buffalo went away."[56]

In his book on radical hope, Jonathan Lear states that Plenty Coups was a "witness to the breakdown of happenings," and not just "an old chief nostalgic for a bygone past."[57] But wasn't he also nostalgic? Plenty Coups "live[d] through a collapse of civilization" and "may thus help us to better understand one of life's remoter but significant possibilities" — that is, the end of one's world.[58] One would likely feel nostalgic bearing witness to such a cataclysm. Did that not also fuel Plenty Coups' radical hope?

If "[r]ebellion requires an emotional intelligence," as Chris Hedges writes, then let us not forget about the emotion of nostalgia.[59] It is obviously a powerful emotion, or else corporations wouldn't have commodified it. But nostalgia doesn't always have to support dangerous ideologies. One can buoy hope with nostalgia — radical hope even in the face of the breakdown of happenings, even when we know the cards are stacked against us. We must think beyond the simple idea that nostalgia is an essentially reactionary emotion, that we can live without it. Only the truly privileged, the ones who have never endured loss, can say they've never felt nostalgic.

This is something corporations and leaders have long known. Disney and Facebook know just how nostalgic people can be, as do politicians running for elected office. They aren't interested in beating the nostalgia out of us. They know the emotion is quite good at collecting votes, attracting clicks, gathering data, and selling products. They're willing to accommodate our nostalgia, even fanning its flames of longing so that we'll consume and click. They know that repatriation, a full return home, won't

cure anyone’s nostalgia. So they keep the public in a low-level nostalgic state — just enough to hold our attention, but not so much as to distress us. However, it’s clear that in the twenty-first century, maximizing nostalgic feelings around the clock to direct the public’s attention isn’t healthy for the public. It merely makes our justified nostalgic feelings in the aftermath of traumatic events even worse. And it puts us in a steady state of anxiety, fearing that something else — our nation, our loved ones, our way of life — will disappear or change. No one can readily live day to day in a heightened state of nostalgia without wanting some kind of relief, be it a turn to the future or a return to the past.

We shouldn’t reject nostalgia outright, but we should be aware when our emotions are being manipulated to benefit some faceless corporation, or a demagogue. We can uncover certain truths about the past to counter the blatant nostalgic appeals of strongmen and plutocrats, but this is a much different exercise than trying to eliminate nostalgia forever. No one can engineer nostalgia out of existence by giving everyone a reality check. Like any emotion, nostalgia is appropriate in some contexts and dangerous in others. We’re always consuming a past that isn’t completely our own, that isn’t a perfect representation of what really happened and that may never fully satisfy us. The question is: which pasts are we consuming? And who benefits from the consumption?

Right now, across the world, there are nostalgic quests underway to protect the homelands of industrialized countries. Particularly in the West, ideological divides are widening as leaders hold firmly to the belief that the Anglo homeland is at risk of falling to bands of outsiders. And yet this brand of nostalgic nationalism will do nothing but barricade the borders of the West into one long detention center, while the Global North fracks its way to extinction, disembedding the poor across the world from their homes. Confronting these nostalgic vigilantes at their barbed-wire checkpoints requires the firm belief that, as climate justice collective The

Wretched of the Earth declares, “Migration is a right and not something you are forced to do because your home is inhospitable.”[60] Just as we should be free to move, we also have a right to settle where we are without the fear of forced displacement. Acknowledging this starts by ending the fortification of homelands with fencing and border walls and giving attention instead to the roots, which must be nurtured in the name of climate justice, not dug up.[61]

And we also have a right to our nostalgia. Capitalism shouldn’t be in the business of manipulating emotions, forcing us to feel compulsory nostalgia, to yearn for the “right” pasts. Racial justice requires fighting for the right to our memories, which are constantly at risk of revision by the Lost Cause nostalgia concretized in statues and memorials everywhere. But there can be no racial justice until the long night of militarism ends. The West, and the US in particular, has mobilized every resource in the name of one goal: to replace global peace relations with defense measures and regime changes. The rhetoric of homeland security justifies the military presence in countries across the world as a preemptive strategy to protect the homeland, but this is merely smoke and mirrors. Military occupation in the twenty-first century is a tactic to expand the fossil fuel, defense, and surveillance industries. As a result, the US has become a perma-war culture, and the wars are waged at home and in countries around the world. Anytime a society calls on its citizens to make the patriotic pledge and support the cause for war, even when they don’t take up arms themselves, even when they are asked to defend the homeland from their living room, that society will buckle under the weight of nostalgia.

Our strategy against these reactionary strains of nostalgia shouldn’t be to embrace any future offered to us, no questions asked. The people, not the power, must be in charge of imagining futures alternative to the ones promised by Big Tech. The movements against Big Tech are fueled partly by a nostalgia for a time — imagined or otherwise — when people weren’t

understood best through data. There is something in humans that is irreducible to data, variables, and parameters, even though worshippers of technology like to think otherwise. Technocrats are fascinated by the supposed purity of numbers, which informs their models and predictions, but in reality, no one can predict the future. Only those circling within the closed loop of computational thinking can believe in such a myth. Data alone cannot open up the same possibilities that our emotions can, but data *does* perpetuate the reign of capitalism, which survives by reducing everything to numbers in order to determine and predict what will sell.

"The idea that society can be divided between tear-streaked reactionaries besotted with the past and flint-eyed radicals staring into the future, has run its time," Alastair Bonnett tells us.[62] Indeed, we must be "Janus-faced," just like nostalgia itself.[63] To go forward into a future that isn't determined by wealth or algorithm, we need to ache for the past now and then.

Milan Kundera claimed that we will never come to terms with being human until we understand this truth about memory: "a reality no longer is what it was when it was; it cannot be reconstructed."[64] But a reality can be yearned for. The past is teeming with lost realities, some of which may be helpful in working towards a present that can "breed futures," as Audre Lorde wrote.[65] After all, the future will arrive whether or not we can predict it, and without a collective, egalitarian vision, someone far more powerful may usher it in for us. If we're already looking back, we owe it to the future to scan beyond the horizon, to search the remote regions of the past where the visionaries huddled in the margins, whispering dreams of a better world, drawing plans to make it happen. Deep in those hidden spaces is where you'll find the future.

Notes

Epigraph: Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, rev. ed. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), 116.

Introduction

1 ABC News, "Remembering September 10th," YouTube, September 10, 2011, video, 2:32, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfqQ4yAa3n4.

2 Nostalgia isn't merely a Western, or even a modern, emotion. In this book, however, my focus is mainly on the circulation of nostalgia in the US and Europe. For studies of nostalgia outside the West, see Alastair Bonnett's *The Geography of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia*, Zainab Saleh's *Return to Ruin*, and M. Hakan Yavuz's *Nostalgia for the Empire*.

3 Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: HarperPerennial, 1984), 251. For two competing perspectives on kitsch, see Sam Binkley, "Kitsch as a Repetitive System: A Problem for the Theory of Taste Hierarchy," *Journal of Material Culture* 5, nol. 2 (2000), 131-52 and Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Duke University Press, 2007). Binkley argues that kitsch "glories in its embeddedness in routines… and its rootedness in the modest cadence of daily life" (135). In a disruptive world, kitsch "works to re-embed its consumers, to replenish stocks of ontological security, and to shore up a sense of

cosmic coherence" (ibid.). But kitsch, Marita Sturken stresses, is also "a key element in superficial symbols of national unity" (22). It can "produce predetermined and conscribed emotional responses" that are framed as "universally shared" in the dominant culture (21, 22).

4 Chris Hinsch, Reto Felix, and Philipp A. Rauschnabel, "Nostalgia beats the wow-effect: Inspiration, awe and meaningful associations in augmented reality marketing," *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 53 (March 2020), 4. For other articles on the positive psychological aspects of nostalgia, see Krystine Irene Batcho, "Nostalgia: Retreat or Support in Difficult Times?," *The American Journal of Psychology* 126, no. 3 (2013); Batcho, "Nostalgia and the Emotional Tone and Content of Song Lyrics," *The American Journal Of Psychology* no. 3 (2007); and Batcho, et al., "A Retrospective Survey of Childhood Experiences," *Journal Of Happiness Studies* 12, no. 4 (August 2011).

5 Nauman Naqvi, "The Nostalgic Subject: A Genealogy of the 'Critique of Nostalgia'," C.I.R.S.D.I.G., Working Paper no. 23 (2007), 6.

6 This is not to say that we always long for painful seasons of life, when we might have relied on nostalgia to get us through. My first year of college was a particularly difficult period, marked by loneliness, isolation, and loads of nostalgia. I do not miss this time. But I do have a wistful fondness for when I lived with my parents after college, a time when I was also isolated and nostalgic. That time, however, wasn't nearly as difficult as my first year in college. At least that's how I remember it. Perhaps nostalgia is fooling me, as it sometimes can.

7 For a thorough account of shock therapy politics, see Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2008).

8 See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero, 2009) and Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2011).

9 Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2008), 22.

10 Ibid., 23.

11 Ibid., 24.

12 Ibid., 84, 25, 22.

13 Ibid., 22.

14 Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingering*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017), 5.

15 Secretary of the Norwegian Nobel Committee Geir Lundestad ultimately regretted giving Obama the Nobel Peace Prize: "Even many of Obama's supporters believed that the prize was a mistake. In that sense the committee didn't achieve what it had hoped for." To read more about Lundestad's admission, see "Nobel secretary regrets Obama peace prize," *BBC News* (September 17, 2015), https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34277960.

16 The title, *The Hours Have Lost Their Clock*, comes from a translation of a line from Vicente Huidobro's poem, *Ecuatorial*: "Mi reloj perdió todas sus horas." I came across the line in John King's English translation of Mario Vargas Llosa's *Notes on the Death of Culture: Essays on Spectacle and Society*, where it is used as an epigraph.

17 Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," from *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 112.

18 Alastair Bonnett has argued in his work that we shouldn't have a condescending attitude towards nostalgia but should, instead, take it seriously. For a nuanced understanding of nostalgia as more than mere backwardness, see his book *The Geography of Nostalgia: Global and Local Perspectives on Modernity and Loss* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

Chapter 1: What Is Nostalgia?

1 Thomas Dodman, *What Nostalgia Was: War, Empire, and the Time of a Deadly Emotion* (The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 128-9. See also Dodman's second chapter, "The Reasons of a Passion," for an

expert account of the routes Hofer's neologism traveled after its coinage.

2 Ibid., 2.

3 Ibid.

4 Jean Starobinski, "The Idea of Nostalgia," *Diogenes* 54 (1966), 84.

5 Ibid.

6 Dodman, *What Nostalgia Was*, 194.

7 Celeste Michelle Condit, *Angry Public Rhetorics: Global Relations and Emotion in the Wake of 9/11* (The University of Michigan Press, 2018), 86.

8 Celeste M. Condit, *Rhetoric and Society*, 2nd ed. (Acton, MA: XanEdu, 2018), 61.

9 Barbara Cassin, *Nostalgia: When Are We Ever at Home?*, trans. Pascale-Anna Brault (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 7. Cassin also coins "planalgia," or "the painful desire not to return but to wander," to describe Odysseus' "nostalgia for elsewhere" in the Odyssey (24).

10 Norman Austin, "Homeric Nostalgia," *Yale Review* 98, no. 2 (April 2010), 46.

11 Starobinski, "The Idea of Nostalgia," 81.

12 Bonnett, *The Geography of Nostalgia*, 5.

13 Ibid.

14 Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 2.

15 Naqvi, "The Nostalgic Subject," 13.

16 Dodman, *What Nostalgia Was*, 69, 153, and 171.

17 Susan J. Matt, *Homesickness: An American History* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 27.

18 Ibid., 130, 139.

19 Dodman, *What Nostalgia Was*, 182. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 6.

20 Dodman, *What Nostalgia Was*, 45.

21 Ibid., 58.

22 Edmund S. Conklin, *Principles of Adolescent Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1935), 215.

23 Naqvi, “The Nostalgic Subject,” 19.

24 Edoardo Campanella and Marta Dassù, *Anglo Nostalgia: The Politics of Emotion in a Fractured West* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 25, 13. Campanella and Dassù have a negative opinion of nostalgia, which, they write, “can only rarely be employed in a cooperative way” and “hardly makes for enlightened politics and effective policies” (3, 8).

25 Ibid., 1.

26 Gary Cross, *Consumed Nostalgia: Memory in the Age of Fast Capitalism* (Columbia University Press, 2015), 232.

27 Ibid., 239.

28 Ibid., 14.

29 Mia Jankowicz, “The Trump campaign could ditch its ‘Keep America Great’ slogan, report says, as the U.S. is ravaged by COVID-19, job losses, and anti-racism protests,” *Business Insider* (June 8, 2020), https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-campaign-considers-ditching-keep-america-great-slogan-wapo-2020-6.

30 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xviii.

31 Ibid.

32 Contemporary far-right and conspiracy groups that rely to some extent on nostalgia include the Proud Boys, QAnon, Groypers, and the Oath Keepers. These groups are disparate in their ideologies, but they all share a general nostalgia for a white nationalist society, founded upon twisted interpretations of Christian conservatism and the US Constitution. They’re also millenarian, believing that, if this white nationalist society is returned to, then a kind of utopian world will be born.

33 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 55.

34 Ibid., 41.

35 Ibid., xviii.

36 "Our contemporary culture is indeed nostalgic; some parts of it — postmodern parts — are aware of the risks and lures of nostalgia, and seek to expose those through irony," Linda Hutcheon wrote in the late 1990s. See Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés, "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern: A Dialogue," *Poligrafías: Revista de Literatura Comparada* 3 (1998), 23.

37 Ibid.

38 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41.

39 Ibid., xviii.

40 Bonnett, *The Geography of Nostalgia*, 16.

41 Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 16-7.

42 Ibid., 18.

43 Ibid., 21.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., 24-5.

46 See Grafton Tanner, *The Circle of the Snake: Nostalgia and Utopia in the Age of Big Tech* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2020); Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xiv; and Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Duke University Press, 1993), 23-4.

47 Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Paul Turner (New York: Penguin Books, 1965), 106.

48 Ibid., 95.

49 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 6.

50 Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 49.

51 Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017). Bauman writes in *Retrotopia* that the Angel of History has "perform[ed] a U-turn: from investing public hopes of improvement in the uncertain and ever-too-obviously un-trustworthy future, to re-reinvesting them in the vaguely remembered past, valued for its assumed stability and so trustworthiness" (6).

52 Although Robert Putnam's classic study of social decline is titled *Bowling Alone*, people were rarely bowling alone when it was published in 2000. League bowling had declined in popularity, but people were bowling more than they were playing other sports — more than they were voting, even. If we're bowling alone, then we're bowling alone together. See Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 111-113.

Chapter 2: In Search of Lost Time and Space

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Conclusion: The Right to Nostalgia

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No’s simplistic plot and nostalgic aesthetics obscure a few startling facts: it ignores the grassroots efforts of the No campaign to register

voters, and, most shockingly, Larraín's parents were wealthy Pinochet supporters. Backlash against the film was swift and biting because of the details it excluded and its simplification of the No campaign's victory. "To what extent can a filmmaker selectively condense and simplify complicated true events and still claim to have made a work faithful to what really happened?" Larry Rohter wrote in an article about the film. Larraín's response was, "I just make movies. I'm not the official version of anything" ("One Prism on the Undoing of Pinochet," *The New York Times* [February 8, 2013], https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/10/movies/oscar-nominated-no-stirring-debate-in-chile.html). But films about history very often become official versions of history for viewers, especially those who are lured by the film's media nostalgia. It isn't a necessary condition of nostalgia to obscure the facts, but sometimes it's used to do so

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Introduction

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Unveiling of the Equestrian Statue of Robert E. Lee, May 29, 1890, in Richmond, Virginia. From *History of the United States*, vol. V by E. Benjamin Andrews (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912). Image is public domain and taken from Wikipedia.

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Mel's drive-in. Still taken from *American Graffiti*.

Chapter 6

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Dick Proenneke at his cabin in 1985. Image is public domain and taken from the US National Park Service website (https://www.nps.gov/lacl/learn/historyculture/proennekes-cabin.htm).

Chapter 8

Recommender algorithm. Flowchart created by the author.

Chapter 9

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Chapter 10

Martha the last passenger pigeon by Enno Meyer. Image is public domain and taken from Wikipedia.

Conclusion

“Dogwood.” Courtesy of Anna Pence.

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Grafton Tanner
Athens, Georgia
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